Who Birthed Us

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Who Birthed Us

by CestPasDuBaudelaire

Summary

Lady Murasaki has died. It is then only natural for Will to accompany his husband to the funeral.
Reminiscences of the past are doomed to rise again, as both Will and Hannibal reflect on their parents and what grieving them mean to them.

But then enters Pascal Popil. And Will can't tell, for the life of him, if that man is supposed to be Hannibal's early Nemesis, or just a hated step-dad.
The mother figure will probably be the only one being buried at that funeral, as Hannibal doesn't seem to be willing to put to rest any of his childhood grudges.

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Popil smiled but it was tinted with some sourness that couldn't be perfectly hidden.

"Ah, that specific smugness of yours," he commented. "You haven't grown out of it, I see. Always the smartest in the room."
"I happen to often be, indeed," Hannibal replied, unapologetic.

Notes

Salut les gens !

I've been working on it for a little while now. If you've see any of my recent work, you may know I am currently *obsessed* with Petty!Hannibal.

In Hannibal Rising, what I love most than anything is his sassyness and a lot of his conversations with Popil are just pure gold. So I knew I needed that figure in Hannibal's life to explore his pettiness at my heart's content.
Don't worry, you don't need to have any knowledge of Hannibal Rising to read this. This story is told through Will's PoV and he didn't read Hannibal Rising either. So you're all good.

Word count: *+/- 35k*
Publication: *I'm gonna update twice a week, it will all be over by the end of September*

Title: *every chapters are titled after flowers that grow in Essonne and therefore could be in the castle garden. No, this is not a pertinent information. :)*
TW: *none.*
There are very vague mentions of past pseudo-incesteous feelings, but it is not stated clearly whether or not there was any behavior in that sense. Mentions of violence also, but it's Hannibal so...

I'll leave you to it.

Nielle Des Blés

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER 1

Nielle Des Blés

"She was your mother, Hannibal."

The sentence had been let loose.

It wasn't tinted with anger or frustration. It was merely the enunciation of a fact. Whatever Chiyoh felt about those words didn't matter. It didn't change the truth behind her words. It was Hannibal's mother.

"Debatable," Hannibal commented, bringing his glass to his lips, and taking a sip.

Will didn't add to that comment. He had an opinion on the topic, but he knew it wasn't his place to share it. Especially if said opinion was unprompted. It was about Hannibal and Chiyoh. Will was meant to do nothing less nor nothing more than to follow their tacit lead.

"She loved you," Chiyoh stated once again.

Will and Hannibal were sitting on their living room's armchairs, but Chiyoh had preferred to stand. She was never here to stay, and she didn't want that to be forgotten. When she was knocking on Will and Hannibal's door, it was always for a reason. And never one that could accommodate comfort or pleasantries.

"Not enough, apparently," Hannibal simply answered.

There was as little anger and frustration in his voice as there was in Chiyoh's. A very courteous tone for a very dark topic.

A great lady had died, Will had understood.

"Is this really a rancor you want to nurture now, Hannibal?"

"There is no rancor, Chiyoh. It is a fact. She legally abandoned and disavowed me. I will not blame her. It may have been the wisest thing she has ever done, and she was a very wise woman. But I have no place at her funeral. I know you hold on to the idea of the family we once were, Chiyoh, but you know it as I do."

"What do I know?"

"That she wouldn't want me there."

Will looked at his own reflection on the surface of the water in his glass. It was too early for any other beverage. Which was a shame, really. That sounded like the kind of conversation that would fare much better with stronger fuel and a more efficient numbing agent.

"Well, she is dead," Chiyoh said after the second of silence that was necessary in order to take in Hannibal's statement. "She doesn't care anymore. But I am well alive. And I do care."

That was hard to oppose. Hannibal had never been one to mind too much the opinion of the dead. For someone with so many God-related metaphors at the ready at every hour of the day and for every possible situation, he cruelly lacked any kind of true spirituality when it came to the afterlife. And maggots' food made for a poor debater, therefore Hannibal didn't bother to listen to it.

Chiyoh, on the other hand... Will wasn't quite sure what kind of relationship she and Hannibal shared now, but he knew it was something that Hannibal valued. And would be receptive to, when it was brought up.

"I am wanted," Hannibal reminded her, as if it was concluding the conversation.

"And everyone in this room knows you only get caught when you want to. What is your point?"

Will agreed with Chiyoh. Not that he voiced it. His role in this conversation was to be on Hannibal's side. At least mostly.

"Where will it be?" he asked. "Out of curiosity."

"Essonne."

"In France? Why?"

He sounded genuinely surprised by that answer, which was a rare emotion to spot on his confident features.

"She didn't have anyone but us. We figured that, at the very end, she would have wanted to get back to him. She loved him, you know."

"As I have been told."

"You cannot doubt that. Everything but that. I was there before you, Hannibal. I knew them when you didn't. She loved him. We decided to bury her with him."

"We?"

Chiyoh paused. Her face being as hard to read as Hannibal's, Will couldn't get the exact nature of the information that was about to be given, but he could tell it was an important one.

"Me and Pascal."

"Pascal Popil?"

This time, all unreadability was lost on Hannibal's face, each of the harsh and usually unmovable features of his face displaying something that was closer to bewilderment than anything Will had ever seen from Hannibal before.

Will had no idea who Pascal Popil was, but apparently it was a meaningful name that couldn't be carelessly thrown around.

"What is he still doing in this picture?"

Chiyoh observed Hannibal in silence for a moment, then she walked to his side. For the first time since they had moved here, the woman sat down with them.

"They remained in contact through the years," she announced.

"In contact?"

"They were... lovers. For lack of better terms. Partner, if you will."

The bewilderment - weak and sober by human standard but unprecedented by Hannibal's - slowly faded away.

"They were lovers," Hannibal repeated. "Partner if I will."

And his face wasn't betraying anything anymore. But Will was used to it. He had quite the experience in reading Hannibal. He knew what was lying behind that skin.

The same way most creatures could sense when a predator was nearby, Will could always pick up on Hannibal's displeasure. It felt like spiders climbing up the skin of his back. And it was currently undeniable.

Hannibal was displeased.

But what instinct couldn't tell Will but habits and years of intimacy could help him guess was the reason for that displeasure. There was something that Hannibal deemed to be very tasteless.

Will didn't know that Pascal Popil but he knew they didn't like him. 'They' including Hannibal and himself. If Chiyoh was disapproving of anything, it seemed to be of Hannibal's reaction.

"Years, Hannibal," she said. "Did you want her to stay alone and isolated forever?"

"Those are the two only possible options? Alone or with Pascal? What a grim dystopia."

"You would have thought the same no matter who it had been."

"That is untrue. Pascal is a specific brand of underwhelming."

"He is a decent man."

"Could you come up with more tepid title if you tried?"

"She is being buried in Essonne, Hannibal. Do you not get what it means? Whose choice do you think this is?"

Hannibal didn't have anything to answer to that. Will wasn't sure what that remark was supposed to mean but it was apparently impactful enough to put an end to that part of the conversation.

Chiyoh had made a point and Hannibal was forced to bow down. That was at least what Hannibal had to be thinking about. Chiyoh, on the other hand - an opposite one - didn't seem interested in a win. She observed Hannibal for a second before sighing and standing up.

"You used to love her," she said. "So much."

"I know. I was there."

She put back on her shoulder the long stripe of the aluminum briefcase she always had with her.

"Should I expect you?" she asked. "Or is that yet another hope you will feed without any intent to fulfill?"

"If Pascal Popil is there, then I cannot come. The second he will catch the first glimpse of me, he will call Jack Crawford on us. I have plans for dear old Jack. Killing him right now would be too early."

"He won't. Call anyone on you. Or anything. He would be willing to indulge a truce for her sake."

"What makes you think that?"

"I just know. He loved her more than he hates you."

Chiyoh, now ready to leave, began to walk to the entrance door of the house. Out of absentminded courtesy, Hannibal stood up from his armchair and bypassed her so as to be able to reach the door before her and hold it open for her. Will followed them in the hall but remained a few feet away, not wanting to interfere with their conversation.

"You come, you don't come, you do as you wish, Hannibal," Chiyoh said her last words on the threshold. "I won't even tell you that you will regret it if you don't come, since I don't know for certain that you are truly able to nurture regrets. What I will tell you is that it will be our last chance at goodbyes. And I could use your presence by my side. Everything else, it is up to you. As always."

After Hannibal had closed the door behind Chiyoh, he was left alone in the hall with Will. The two men observed each other in silence, processing what had just been announced. Will knew that asking Hannibal what he wanted to do wouldn't bring anything to the situation. First of all, Hannibal had never been one to enjoy revealing his plans. Secondly, Will didn't think he wanted a repeat of the conversation with Chiyoh. Therefore, he tried something else.

"I'm sorry for your loss?"

Hannibal remained there for a moment, his hand still on the door he had just closed, his eyes strangely vague, the way they rarely were.

"Are you telling me or asking me?"

"Not quite sure, gotta say."

Hannibal smiled at him, and he let go of the knob to get back to the living-room.

"Thank you, Will," he said while passing him.

Will hesitated, wondering if he should leave for now or follow Hannibal, but he ultimately decided to stay where he was. If Hannibal didn't want to have a conversation, he would simply say so. He had always been his own best advocate.

"May I ask questions, or you'd rather not?" Will inquired, deciding for the most straightforward path of actions.

For a brief moment, Will was convinced Hannibal would cut the conversation short. Or, more probably, find a smooth and socially acceptable way to get out of the room. But he didn't. With his thumb, Hannibal rubbed and caressed his wedding band, making it turn around the base of his ring finger.

"My story is your story, Will. And you are as legitimate to know about the situation as I am. What do you want to know about our family?"

He didn't give any inflection to his tone, but it appeared obvious to Will that Hannibal had wanted the emphasis of his sentence to be on the 'our'. When he had the chance to seamlessly drop it in a conversation, Hannibal liked to remind Will - and everyone else in the room - that they were sharing more than simply a roof.

"Lady Murasaki," Will began, leaning against the doorframe as Hannibal sat back in his armchair, "I've heard her name before. Is she the woman whom Chiyoh assisted?"

"Yes. As a child, Chiyoh worked for and was instructed by Lady Murasaki."

"That's when you two met. She was..."

The conversation Will had had with Chiyoh on that topic had happened years ago. And the only vivid memory Will had of it was that he had ended up being pushed off a train. Yet, as he was pronouncing that name, thinking back on Chiyoh, bits of it were coming back to him.

"She was your aunt, wasn't she?"

"Yes. She married my father's brother a couple of years before my birth."

"The uncle's the one who adopted you."

"Along with Lady Murasaki. When Uncle Robertus died, a year after my adoption, she became my only custodian."

"Chiyoh called her your mother but... she wasn't, right?"

"She didn't give birth to me. And she didn't raise me during my early childhood. But she did adopt me and cared for me for years. And she is the last legal parent I ever had. Though calling her my mother is misleading. First, I have a mother. Dead, maybe, but she still existed. And secondly, since she abandoned me and since Uncle Robertus died childless, we technically have absolutely no family link, beyond the ones that are entertained only for the sake of nostalgia. We are as good as strangers. Were, now."

"Except for the years you spent together."

"Yes," Hannibal admitted. "Except for those years."

That was a strange thing, to see Hannibal dodging around. People could think the Chesapeake Ripper was a pathological liar, but it was not true, from Will's experience. Hannibal loved to play with the truth, that was a fact, but he also craved for the kind of friendship and relationship where one could be absolutely sincere with their interlocutor. He had reached such a level of intimacy with Will. Yet, today, he didn't feel like answering with honesty. He was not lying, but he was mixing his answers, speaking of the legal, the factual and the emotional as if they were one matter only, blurring the story he was telling.

Will didn't believe Hannibal was doing it for any other sake than his own. And pressing him on an issue he was not interested in exploring was useless. Will decided to take the hint and ask something else instead.

"Who's Pascal Popil?"

"Lady Murasaki's lover, it would seem."

"Yeah. I got that part. But you knew his name. You two met before?"

"I met him before he met Lady Murasaki. He arrested me when I was thirteen."

"He... arrested you? What for?"

Hannibal opened his arms, palms up, in a perfect picture of innocent ignorance.

"Murder, I would guess?" he said, seemingly unconvinced. "Something of that sort."

"It... Was it you?"

"Likely so."

"And then... What happened? Come on, Hannibal, you can't just gloss over that story."

"Nothing happened. He arrested me. He interrogated me. For hours or so. I said it wasn't me. He said it was me. We didn't find any common ground. Then, at some point during the night, while I was still speaking with him, someone threw the missing head of the victim over the fence of the police station. I was released not long after."

"And he never found anything to prove you were guilty?"

"No. But he did arrest me again, when I was seventeen."

Will held back a sigh. Hannibal knew how to tell stories. He was perfectly able to make them clear and efficient. If he was deconstructing his tale here, it was simply that he enjoyed Will's puzzlement and incomprehension. A sigh would give him too much pleasure. That would be a reward for his game.

"Why did he arrest you again?" Will asked, remaining perfectly patient.

"Murder, I would guess again. Murders. Five, this time. But who is counting? I mean... apart from him, of course."

"And you got away once again?"

"Yes. Not much going on against me. A lot going on for me. And Inspecteur Popil's history of going after a thirteen-year-old innocent boy. No one was interested in pursuing this investigation. I didn't even reach a trial. Dropped to everyone's relief but Pascal Popil's."

"You walked out unscathed."

"I did. I often do."

Will absent-mindedly rubbed the rough patch of skin that his scar had left in the middle of his beard. Over the years, that had become a bit of an unconscious habit he had when he was thinking too much. Hannibal had first tried to fight against it, when Will's scar was still healing and scratching it would just widen the cut. But he had given up and accepted his

defeat, now coming to terms with it and finding something endearing in that thoughtless gesture.

"It was your first murder?" will asked after a moment. "That one when you were thirteen. Or did you kill before?"

"Hard to say. But I would think so, yes. First time."

"So that Popil guy... He is linked to your very first murder."

"As a matter of fact, and fact only, he is."

"And he is the first one who ever began to guess what you are."

Hannibal simply nodded, waiting to see where Will wanted to go with that.

"Does he..." Will stopped a second, trying to find the right word to express his thought, "mean something?"

"Inspecteur Popil?"

"He has a peculiar place in your life. A unique one, if we're being at least technical. Is he... important to you?"

"No," Hannibal answered right away. "He is not an important man."

And there was something that seemed to be akin to anger, behind Hannibal's smooth expression. Which was a highly unusual feeling for him to experience. He was always prompt to deal with annoyance. Swift deaths - or long, gruesome agonies - were his way to go. But here, it was more than what he usually felt for his pigs and cows. No matter what he had said to Chiyoh, there was a rancor that was more tenacious, and a displeasure that was weighted by more than just disappointment. Hannibal's words, though they may not be outright lies, didn't sound like perfect truth to Will's ears. If he was able to get such an out-of-character reaction from Hannibal, Pascal Popil had to be an important man.

Not that Will had any interest in making Hannibal acknowledge it. It was all very secondary for both of them. Instead of pursuing that topic, Will pushed himself off the wall and walked to Hannibal. Once by his side, as Hannibal was looking up to still keep him in his sight, Will laid a soft kiss on top of the man's forehead.

"If you want to go, Hannibal," he whispered against the skin, "and you want me with you, I'll stick by your side. If you want to stay, I will stand that choice just as well. Let me know what you decide, and I will support that version."

He kissed the skin one last time and straightened up. Hannibal, who had closed his eyes to enjoy the attention, opened them again, all anger gone. Fully distracted that he was by Will's mere existence.

"What do you think I should do, Will?"

Every reasonable person, when faced with that question, would have a variant of the same answer.

'Only you can know that. It is your choice.'

Life choices were meant to be taken by the one who was living that life. But that was without considering two simple facts. The first one was that Will and Hannibal were not reasonable. Not genuinely. They enjoyed a parody of reason that could grant them clarity without impairing any of their whims.

The second one was that Will and Hannibal were not two detached people, each owning their own life. Not really. Not anymore.

Will sat on the leathered arm of the chair and gave the question a thought. His hand naturally found the short hair falling on Hannibal's neck.

"I think you should go," he finally said.

"To pay my respect?"

"Not necessarily. But once you're there, you will be able to react how you wish. You can gloat or cry, depending on your mood."

"I don't cry anymore. Not for matters that don't have you as their center."

Will's hand caressed Hannibal's cheek, then pushed back the few strands of hair that had fallen on his forehead.

"I'll do the mourning for you, if you can't, Hannibal. I've got your back."

Hannibal smiled with joy. He didn't need his back to be covered in any way, but he loved nothing more than to sense Will's breath on his nape, both literally and figuratively.

Will knew Hannibal would go. If not to say goodbye to his late mother figure, at least to have quality time with his husband in a unique setting.

Hannibal simply nodded, and passing his arms around Will's waist, he pressed his face against the warm belly offered to him.

Will instinctively hugged him back, though his mind was still on what was about to come their way.

Maybe it had been bold of him to assume he could be married and be completely free of in-laws.

The bright side was that the meeting couldn't possibly be more awkward than it would have been if said in-laws were still alive.

That was a win in the book of his associability.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed it.
Next chapter coming soon.

Petite Cigüe

Chapter Notes

Salut les gens !

Hope you're having a decent beginning of the week!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 2

Petite Cigüe

The two Lecter castles were a perfect negative of each other, as if they had been thought and built as echoes of one another.

Will was familiar with the one in Lithuania, where Hannibal had spent his early childhood. He had explored it, when he had been trying to piece up the mismatched bits of knowledge he had about the Ripper. The gothic aesthetic of the steep roofs and the pointed arches had set the perfect decor for Will's wanderings. Young Hannibal had discovered the world and Will had discovered Hannibal's world under that gloomy and whimsical aegis, and it had been a meaningful muse to the building of their conjoined mental palaces.

This Lecter castle had been spared from the gothic severity to embrace the brightness and serenity of classicism. The beige stones of Saint-Maximin, that had given to the French capital its unique visual style that had made it a symbol of beauty across the world, were shining here as well under the bright summer sun. The gardens around were a marvel of topiary and floral arts, the alleys between the statues, the hedges and the glasshouses drawing patterns of their own. The marble, naked bodies, guarding the fountains and the gazebos, were sitting or lying in leisurely fashions. The wide, open space had been thought as an invitation for idleness and pleasure, when the Lithuanian castle had been a place for melancholy and introspection. The later was for the torture of the mind when the former was for the relief of the senses.

There was a lake, lazing and shimmering under the sun, as well as a couple of wooden boats attached to the pontoon. Behind it, following its shore, an arm of forest was giving the place that hint of untamed nature that, when placed around such careful architecture, seemed more like purposeful Romanticism than true wilderness.

That new castle that was slowing revealing itself to the gaze of the newcomers had fewer turrets and peaks than its Lithuanian counterpart. With an embellished frontispiece, white stone stairs leading to the main door and large arch windows, it seemed less twisted and tortuous. More solid as a whole. Surely, it couldn't be haunted by as many ghosts as the towers of the original one.

That was Will's certitude as Hannibal parked the car at the end of the main alley, along with two other vehicles.

"There'll be people?" Will wondered, his attention momentarily taken away from the splendid manor in front of them. "Other than us, I mean."

"That would be Chiyoh's," Hannibal said, gesturing at the motorcycle next to Will's side of the car.

"What about this one?"

"I am guessing the retirement pension of an inspector does not pay enough for a hotel nearby."

Hannibal had unfastened his seatbelt and he was about to open his door when Will stopped him with a hand on his elbow.

"Wait a second. I have questions."

Hannibal let go of the door and turned toward Will, always happy to hear from him.

"What's the dynamic we're going for?" Will asked, after having undone his seatbelt as well.

"What do you mean?"

"If we're about to meet him, what's the ambiance we're going for? So far, each time he has been mentioned, there has been some subtle and socially acceptable bitching going on. Are

we keeping that passive-aggressive subtext the whole time or are we trying to make it as smooth and easy for everyone as we can?"

Hannibal seemed perfectly puzzled by the question, and Will sighed.

"All I'm saying," he clarified, "is that if you want me to hate that guy's guts, I will. No questions asked. Just wanna be sure it's what you want before we're going in."

"I do not hate him," Hannibal stated. "I am simply... underwhelmed by him."

Having said all that there was to say on that man, he opened the door of the car.

"But who knows," he added as he was standing up. "It was more than thirty years ago. Things may have changed."

That didn't sound like a statement that was coming from a place of certitude...

Will got out as well and walked around the car to get to Hannibal who continued.

"In any case, there is no reason for discourtesy. We wouldn't want to be the petty ones."

That was Hannibal's conclusion and they both climbed up the stairs toward the main double door.

"How many castles do you own?" Will asked as they were passing by the statue of a woman caressing a calf.

"Technically, I don't own anything anymore, courtesy of Interpol. But this castle, I never truly owned it in the first place. It belonged to my uncle, then we had to sell it upon his death to pay off the inheritance tax. When I became rich enough, upon the end of my twenties, I bought it back and sent the deed to my aunt. She never went back here, as far as I am aware. But it is hers, not mine."

"And now?"

Hannibal thought about it for a second, apparently having been so uninterested in that question that he had not wondered about it yet.

"Now I guess it belongs to Interpol. Unless we learn that it is not just the late husband that she has replaced with a water downed mockery but also the son."

No pettiness, he had said? Will didn't mind anyway. He would match the tone.

Before they could reach the door, one of the wooden panels opened and Chiyoh stepped out of the shadowed hall of the manor. For a second, she stayed in the doorframe, observing the two newcomers. Then, without any comment, nor any expression on her face, she bridged the distance between her and Hannibal and took her childhood friend and remaining family in her arms.

Hannibal, knowing her more than Will did, must have not been as surprised by that unusual affection from her, for he answered the hug right away, his hand finding the back of Chiyoh's head to keep her against him. The two nearly cousins spent a moment like that, embracing each other in a way they must not have done since childhood. Chiyoh even closed her eyes to breathe in that smell so characteristic of her younger years. And, when she stepped back, it was obvious that it was harder for her to meet Hannibal's gaze.

"A mock funeral is organized in Japan," she said, putting back some distance after that impromptu shared moment. "I have been told Jack Crawford is there. Asking questions."

"What are the answers?"

"The truth. No one knows you there. No one is expecting you either. But we know they are not looking elsewhere. This funeral will be held in a very small committee."

"How small?" Will asked.

"The three of us and Pascal."

"Ah. Very small indeed."

"We don't want to attract any attention."

That was understandable. But, as Will was thinking about that distraction and how well it could potentially work to keep them away from the authorities' eyes, there was something slightly bothering. A detail not lining up in the picture Chiyoh was painting for them.

"You said it was that man's doing," Will pointed out. "That Popil. That it was thanks to him that the funeral is taking place here."

"Yes."

"He went through the ordeals of doing that elaborate scam, with a mock funeral and distracted authorities, though he had no idea whether Hannibal would even come or not?"

That didn't sound like a man who had any harsh feelings for Hannibal. On the contrary, it sounded like someone more invested in this whole situation than even Chiyoh was.

But it was all quickly cleared up with the next bit of information Will received.

"The authorities are not the only ones that we are trying to keep away from Lady Murasaki. They are secondary, actually. Pilgrims have learned about it."

"Ah. I see."

Every serial killer had them. A dedicated fan base ready to mystify everything related to their monstrous idol. Of course, the death of the Chesapeake Ripper's mother would attract all kinds of weirdos and cranks. And Hannibal, with his looks, his skills, and the horror of his crimes, had a particularly disturbed and motivated following.

That was without even mentioning all the tabloid journalists that had to have picked up on the smell of shit and family drama. For the briefest of seconds, Will wondered if, on the other side of the globe, Freddie Lounds was with Jack Crawford at that exact moment. With the Verger-Bloom family hiding away and Bedelia dead, there were not many of them left behind to gather and form a survivor group.

"I am sorry for that," Hannibal said. "Sincerely so."

And it was not a lie. Hannibal had a sense of decorum and decency. That he could choose to ignore when it suited him, but he still was never too happy with rudeness. Cohorts of people making Lady Murasaki's funeral about him was certainly not something he approved of.

"Don't apologize for the few things you are not directly responsible for, Hannibal," Chiyoh said before stepping back to allow them inside the castle.

The early summer temperature was suffocating, without any clouds to weaken the sun rays, and it was pleasant to step inside the shadowed hall. Will took the time to look around, taking in the view for the first time.

The room meant to welcome the visitors had large proportions and a breathy ambiance thanks to the big windows overlooking the garden. The ceiling was noticeably high and, along with the walls, it was decorated with white flowery reliefs. A colonnade was supporting an open balcony accessible from the second floor, and arches had been built between them to separate the entrance from the corridor leading to the marble stairs. On the right and the left, a wide hallway crossed the entrance perpendicularly, and kept the patterns of windows so diligently that the whole area was bathed in light. At regular intervals, closed wooden doors were teasing rooms of all sorts though none could be truly guessed from the entrance.

"I arrived a couple of days ago," Will heard Chiyoh say to Hannibal behind him. "I've had enough time to prepare your room."

"You didn't have to."

"I know. I just felt like preparing your arrival may summon you. I don't know if it did anything, but you are here, and it is ready now."

"Good morning, Hannibal."

Not recognizing that new voice, Will was able to rip his eyes from the many decorations around them to look at the newcomer.

A man had just walked down the stairs and was now walking towards them. He was old - probably more than twenty years older than Hannibal - and his face was marked by time. Wrinkles were circling his eyes and his skin, distended and slack, was falling under his chin. But, in the straightness of his nose, the clever twinkle in his eyes, the strength of his jaw and the charm of his general demeanor, it was easy to tell he had been a man of great beauty in his youth. Positively handsome in ways that couldn't be denied. There was something about the perfect structure of his face and his carefully groomed hair that was reminiscent of the old Hollywood actors, heroes of black and white movies, that were nearly as moral as they were conventionally attractive.

When he arrived in front of them, Will could see that the man seemed to be as tall as Hannibal, except that his whole posture was not as strictly straight and perfect, his shoulders naturally more relaxed and slightly nonchalant.

"You..." the man began, his eyes detailing Hannibal with an expression that was hard to read, "... changed a lot, son."

He held a hand out and it seemed nearly unconscious. The whole greeting but conventions to the man. But Will barely noticed it, weirded out that he was by the unexpected word he had used for Hannibal. He could easily guess who that new face was, and therefore how the two men had met each other, but still, being confronted with the fact that Hannibal had once been a child was deeply unsettling.

"I shouldn't be surprised," the man continued. "I have seen your pictures in the news."

"Of course, you have," Hannibal conversationally answered, shaking the offered hand. "Tell me, do you still have my mugshots? Do you keep them under your pillow for good sleep?"

"Hannibal..." Chiyoh whispered.

But Hannibal wasn't interested in pursuing that conversation. He slightly turned on his right to put a hand on the small of Will's back and include him in their little gathering.

"Will," he said, "this is Inspecteur Pascal Popil. Pascal, this is my husband, Professor Will Graham."

Will was not used to being introduced by his title anymore. He had never done so before, and they now lived in enough isolation that there was no need for introduction in the first place, but of course Hannibal wouldn't have forgotten to subtly point out Will's social standing and academic success.

Though it wasn't clear if he was doing it for Will's sake or for his own ego.

Will didn't mind either way and he shook the hand Popil extended for him.

"Professor Will Graham," Popil repeated. "So, you're not dead."

"Depends on who you ask," Will answered without batting an eye.

"I guess I am asking you."

"Muddy waters."

They let go of each other's hand, and Will put his in his pocket, where it couldn't be reached anymore. Enough contact for the day. Apparently, living in isolation with Hannibal for so long was making any interaction with anyone but him much more tedious than they used to be before the Fall. He had simply exchanged a few words and shaken a hand, yet he already wanted to step back.

"You have luggage in the car?" Chiyoh asked Hannibal before any silence could settle.

"Yes. We traveled lightly though. We will handle it. I will be showing Will around as well."

"I would like a word with you when you will be settled."

Hannibal nodded and, his hand still on Will's back, he began to turn away to get back to their car where their suitcase was. Will was following him, but Hannibal stepped only a few feet away.

"Out of curiosity," he said, "where are you staying?"

He didn't look at anyone in particular, but it was obvious to whom he had asked that question.

"Here," Popil answered.

"It is a big castle," Hannibal pointed out, expecting more precision.

"He is staying in Lady Murasaki's room," Chiyoh interrupted, her eyes challenging Hannibal to find anything to say about that.

Hannibal, his back on all of them, didn't see that defiance.

"You mean Robertus'."

None answered and Hannibal walked away. Will detailed the ceiling for a few seconds, as to not meet anyone's gaze, but he followed Hannibal as soon as possible.

Once back outside, he threw a glance at his husband, who didn't seem angered in the slightest. Actually, Hannibal smiled at him, amused for some reason.

"I would appreciate it if you could hold back any comment about the decoration of my room," he said, having apparently forgotten everything that had happened just a second ago, always so quick to move on. "I was young, and my tastes were not as educated as they now are."

"Did you have posters of boybands on the walls?" Will asked.

"No."

"My disappointment is unmeasurable."

Hannibal opened the trunk and Will grabbed their suitcase.

"Got it."

They got back to the entrance hall of the castle. The two other inhabitants couldn't be seen anymore, and Hannibal guided Will to the main staircase and then up the second floor. From the outside, the castle seemed particularly tall, and Will had guessed at least four stories, but, from the inside, he realized it was mostly due to the very high ceilings and he didn't believe that, in the main buildings, outside of the towers, there was more than two stories and a spacious attic.

Hannibal showed him the way through the corridors, passing by a number of doors of beautiful, lacquered wood, to finally arrive at another stair.

"After I arrived in France," Hannibal said while beginning to climb up the steps, "I first spent a few weeks in the hospital. Physically I wasn't in the healthiest of states. Uncle Robertus, who was still trying to find a way to communicate with me, wanted to ease me into that new home he planned on offering me. He emptied all the guest rooms in the castle - and there are a lot of them - and asked for pictures to be taken of each of them. He brought the pictures to the hospital and showed them all to me. Telling me I could choose whichever I liked best."

"He hoped to make you enthusiastic about it," Will said. "He sounds like a decent man."

The stairs were narrow and spiraling, and carrying the suitcase through that small space was not the easiest ordeal. Hannibal took the luggage from Will's hands, as it was obvious he was more used to that task than Will.

"He was," he said, answering the comment about his uncle's decency. "He spent hours sitting with me, drawing on the pictures, with the cheap blue pen a nurse had given him. He tried to make me picture my future bedroom with my future family. When I was released from the hospital and brought here, the bedroom was exactly how we had created it in our mind. And I felt like I already knew that room."

Looking through the window, on the curved wall, Will realized they were getting up one of the large towers, on the west side of the castle.

"He went out of his way to make sure you would be comfortable," Will said, his eyes on the hedge at the bottom of the tower. "Was it out of kindness or duty?"

"He had a sense of both, that is undeniable. But he has never made me feel like I was some part of a social or moral obligation."

Arriving at the end of the stairs, Hannibal put the suitcase down. There was only one door, the room on the other side probably taking the whole space of the tower. The door itself seemed identical to all the others, if it wasn't for the name carved on it, in large, beautiful cursive letters. It wasn't dangling from a nail or glued on top of the wood. It was engraved in it, and to reassign that room would have required changing the whole door.

"The committing kind," Will said and Hannibal caught his thought.

"They were afraid I thought they would abandon me."

"You thought that?"

"Maybe for a while. Not long, however. And I did end up being abandoned. Doors are not such unbreakable promises, it would seem."

Hannibal reached for the knob and opened the way, stepping aside to let Will enter first. As could have been expected from the shape of the tower, the bedroom on the other side of

the wooden panel was circular. Repeating the architectural style of the rest of the castle, there were three arch windows, letting plenty of light in. The window frames were slightly protruding, and the sill had been turned into seats, with clear-colored pillows and padding. Long cream curtains, falling with an elaborated drape, and kept together with beautiful knots of golden strings, were adding some old-world charm to the modernization of the windowsill.

The curvature of the wall was such that every piece of furniture had to have been custom made. But the Lecter family had spared no expense for their nephew, for the room was far from being scarcely decorated. A desk of solid wood, built so that it would perfectly fit the shape of the wall, was between two windows, framed on each side by two long and narrow bookshelves. They weren't containing the thousands of books Hannibal always collected in whatever house he was living in for more than a month, but it was still the beginning of an impressive collection. Especially since the old leather-bound spines, whitened by the years, were letting Will guess that it was not the most accessible literature, neither in terms of price nor in terms of vocabulary.

A gentleman's chest had also been built specifically for that room, along with two chests of drawers. It was taking a whole portion of the wall, yet it would do little for the kind of extended wardrobe Hannibal now had and was forced to keep in a fully separated room. All the basis of what Hannibal Lecter was were gathered here, but in smaller proportions, and more tepid fashions.

Opposed to the door, the elaborate headboard against the wall, there was a queen size bed, with cream sheet and golden gilding on top of the coverlet, an echo of the fabrics chosen for the curtains. At the end of the bed, there was a padded bench, repeating the same colors as the sheets.

On top of the headboard, which was particularly thick thanks to the specificity of the room, there were wooden carvings of flowers and ivies, made out of the same material as the bed itself.

Everything here looked a lot like what Will knew of Hannibal's taste and he had no difficulty picturing a younger version of that peculiar monster living here. But there was one element that seemed particularly out of place. The walls were covered with drawings. All anarchically arranged, put on top of each other without any care for the general picture, dozens of sketches and outlines, most half-finished, were plastered on the walls. The room that would have otherwise looked breathy and large now seemed cluttered, no matter in which direction one was watching. Will tried to detail the drawings on the yellowed papers but it was genuinely hard to tell the motives apart from each other. He knew there were some facial structures, some body details, a house maybe, and smoky ambiences, but nothing more precise could be said without a closer look.

"It's a bit..." Will began though he had no idea on how to end this sentence.

Suffocating? Oppressive?

"Exhibitionistic," Hannibal finished for him. "I know."

"That really wasn't the word I was looking for."

Hannibal brought the suitcase inside the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

"At that age, I thought that if I kept something right before my eyes, it would make it easier to think about it. I had yet to figure out I was just as efficient in the privacy of my own skull."

That was it, Will thought. The difference between then and now. These drawings scattered around had an aim and a purpose, when Hannibal's art now had no other motive than to please and amuse him. He had been driven, now he was merely strolling through his life.

"Your mind was... busy."

"I guess so."

Hannibal brought the suitcase to the dresser and, as he was part of those unrelatable individuals who would unpack their belongings the second they would arrive, he began to put Will's and his clothes in the empty drawers. Will, on the other hand, who was not that deranged, did what every sane person would do. He walked to the bed and let himself fall on it with a long, exhausted sigh.

The sunlight, piercing through the windows, was warming the room, the summer already forgetting everything of the softness of the spring that preceded it. The sky was adorned with bright blue nuances and was an invitation to step outside and explore the world around.

Nothing here looked like funerals. Nothing was betraying the absence that filled this castle. At least to Will's eyes.

To Hannibal’s, things had to be a bit different.

When he was done with their clothes, Hannibal stood by the bed.

"Do you want to have a look around?" he asked.

Will simply patted the mattress by his side. Hannibal didn't need words. Without hesitation, he laid down as well, on his side, facing Will. He brought his own arms under his cheek to rest his head at a comfortable level without having to disturb the making of the bed.

"I could use a nap," he conceded, his eyes not taking long before fluttering.

He had driven hours to bring them here, and though Hannibal could easily push through tiredness, he was not someone who enjoyed exhausting himself. Their life together was too indulging, it had spoiled them into only wishing for the good, pleasant and peaceful sides of existence. They had had enough of all the other sides.

Will brought his forehead against Hannibal's, his hand finding his husband's waist. He closed his eyes as well, letting the distant songs of the many birds lull him toward sleep. He hadn't been so tired before lying down, but something about the peace of this room and Hannibal falling asleep was dragging him along.

"Hannibal?" he whispered, as his eyes were becoming heavier.

For a few seconds, he didn't get any answer. He first thought that Hannibal had succumbed to sleep, but a breath slightly deeper than the others wrinkled the silence of the room.

"Hmm?"

"How is it? To be back here."

Hannibal's words were slow, engulfed with fatigue.

"It is too late."

Chapter End Notes

That was ch 2. I'm gonna post ch3 later this week.
In the meantime, take good care.

Actée en Epi

Chapter Notes

Salut les gens !
Hope you're having a nice day and that the weather is not too unbearable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 3

Actée en Epi

Napping was the closest one could get to play head or tail directly with fate itself. It was either the most invigorating of blessings or the most debilitating of curses.

When Will woke up, he felt like he had slept through several days, and that, in that great period of time, his brain had forgotten who and where they were, as well as what was even the point of waking up. Before trying to have any coherent thought, Will's first reaction was to growl. Which, surprisingly enough, did very little to improve his situation.

He felt something warm against his face and nuzzled against it, not having to think or open his eyes to recognize the presence of the man to whom he woke up to every morning. For a moment, he stayed there, still and comfortable, hoping that sleep would come back and overcome the tedious haze his brain was under. But, after what could have been seconds or minutes, he came to terms with the fact that it would not happen and he opened his eyes.

The room was much darker than it had been when they had arrived, and, since the sky was still cloudless, it was telling that the afternoon was coming to an end and getting ready to give way to the evening. There was still a residual heat on the bedsheets where the indirect light of the sun, reflected by the stone wall, had fallen on them, but it could be guessed that a chiller night was upon the castle.

Will rubbed his eyes and face, to try to give himself some energy back and, when his attempt was met with mitigated success, he sighed and backed away from the chest against which he had curled. Hannibal, his head a few inches away from the pillow, was still very much asleep. His slow breath was perfectly silent, but his torso was rising and dropping at a strictly regular rhythm, and it didn't seem that Will's motions in his vicinity had bothered him in any way.

That kind of soft and peaceful moment always made Will reflect on who they had been, a few years ago, compared to who they were now. He was used to seeing Hannibal asleep, or to share quiet mornings - here afternoon - with him. He was familiar with that intimacy and that specific brand of serenity. It was why, sometimes, he needed an active effort to remind himself of the tortuous path they had had to walk to reach that contentment. It was a hard concept to wrap his mind around than to think Hannibal had not always been a part of his life, and even less so a peaceful one.

After having laid a light kiss on top of Hannibal's temple, Will carefully rolled out of bed and stood up. He didn't want to wake Hannibal up, if there was no reason calling for it. Though that also meant Will didn't have much to do. He didn't truly want to explore the castle without a guide. There would be no point when all the details and the anecdotes could only be given by Hannibal. And he also didn't want to meet anyone on his own. Will very much felt like he was stepping in a family that wasn't his. A mismatched, dysfunctional, unevenly loving family, but a family nonetheless. They all shared a story, a past, and complex relationships. Will was an outsider that had very little knowledge of what he was stepping into.

But if he didn't want to see the castle without Hannibal, then there wasn't much left for him to do. The room he was currently in wouldn't entertain him for very long and snooping around wouldn't fill a whole hour of his time. Nonetheless, little was better than nothing, and he began to detail his surroundings.

He started with the drawings on the wall. They were hard to miss and even harder to look away from. They were proof that this room didn't belong to the Hannibal Will knew. A Hannibal who was far too modest to let his thoughts be known and to bare the complex structures of his inner schemings. Ever since Will had met Hannibal, the Ripper's mind had been a hidden machinery of cogs and balance wheels that daylight could only pester and vex. Only years of getting to know him had allowed Will snippets and then full view on that clicking wonder. The Hannibal he knew was simply not the post-it on the fridge and doodling in the margin kind of guy. Everything that ever got out of his secretive body was intended for others. What was for himself never crossed the limits of his skin.

Seeing vestiges of what had been wonderings, works in progress, and stumbling researches was simply not something Will could ever picture Hannibal exposing today. At least not on any other wall than his mental palace's.

With curiosity, Will walked to the closest section of wall where the yellowed pieces of paper formed a second wallpaper. He knew none of the faces that were half drawn there. On the other hand, he knew none of the figures of Hannibal's past, having never seen any picture. For all he knew, one among them could very well be the famous Robertus Lecter, Will would have no way to tell. What he could tell, however, was that those drawings were very far from Hannibal's current style. Maybe it was just youth, but Will wasn't so sure. Everything was murky and wobbly. As if the topics had been seen through a hazy, grey fog, that was blurring the shapes and fading the colors. Will didn't know if it was a stylistic choice, but it didn't look like anything Hannibal now enjoyed.

Among the few, repetitive topics half drawn on that wall, however, Will recognized one of them. Not that he had seen it before, but that it was obvious enough to guess. A baby face. A baby hand. The characteristic roundness of early childhood. Straight hair and eyes just a bit too big. Eyes Will had already seen on another face.

He had never seen pictures of Mischa Lecter. Hannibal didn't carry any around, after all. His wallet was for money and fake IDs. And the sister was not a topic that they had ever addressed again, apart from that one mention in Hannibal's office in Baltimore. Will had learned a bit about her, during his pilgrimage in Lithuania. And he guessed enough to fill some gaps as well. But, as a whole, he didn't know much. And he didn't care either. He didn't think Hannibal could truly make sense and even if his roots were tightly intertwined around Mischa's corpse, for Will, it appeared to be more a matter of correlation than it was a matter of causation.

But, apparently, the young Hannibal who had lived here didn't have the same wisdom and insight and Will could guess that all those drawings were an attempt at digging up roots in hope of an explanation. Adolescence was a period of introspection and figuring out for everyone, after all. Some discovered sexuality or politics, for Hannibal it had been his own absurdity.

Will walked away from the drawings and looked around. There wasn't much to see, really. The cupboards were empty if not for their few clothes. The desk was perfectly ordered and the cabinets by each side were only used to store homework and personal studies. Very few of the books were in English, and those that were had such awfully boring titles that Will didn't even bother to look at the first page.

What he took a while to notice, however, was that the padded top of the bed bench could be removed to reveal a storage space underneath. And though what Will found would have been expected by everyone else but him, he had known better, and therefore was fully surprised.

Kid toys. A chest full of them. Cars, trains, dolls, soldiers, wooden tea sets, stuffed animals, a pile of all those items had been gathered here. They had all the bright, cheerful

colors of childhood, and, at their mere sight, anyone would create pictures of innocence and lightheartedness in their mind. Nothing even remotely connectable with Hannibal Lecter. Puzzled, Will picked up one of the toys. It was a stuffed dog, with a light blue fur and big ears falling flat on each side of its head. It was looking at Will with its shiny eyes, begging to be played with.

"Making new friends?"

The voice that had said that was still slightly hoarse from sleep, and Will looked up, toward the bed in front of him. Hannibal, with his eyes only half opened, was observing Will with an amused expression. He didn't seem bothered at all by the sight of his old belongings being searched through.

Will turned the dog's face toward Hannibal.

"What's the name?" he asked.

Hannibal brought his arm behind his neck to tilt his head up and he observed the stuffed dog carefully, taking a deep, slow breath.

"Teddy," he finally said, before rubbing his eyes.

"You've just made it up," Will said, not buying the idea that Hannibal would ever choose a name without some religious or literary reference to spice it up.

"Yes," Hannibal admitted.

"You never bothered to name it."

"Never."

Hannibal sat up and stretched the muscles of his shoulders.

"What is this all about?" Will asked, letting the stuffed dog back into the chest.

"Uncle Robertus' attempt at giving me my childhood back."

Hannibal's eyes, now more lively than they had been a minute ago but vaguely distant, looked at the opened bench by the end of the bed.

"He kept bringing new toys home. He hoped I would one day find something I would like well enough to play with. You now bear sight of the result of his Sisyphean task."

That was both heartwarming and sad, depending on the perspective one had on the situation.

"You never played with them?"

"Not really."

"Not a single one?"

Hannibal gave it a thought, certainly trying to remember the most mundane parts of his childhood that really felt like it was a world away from them.

"There was one. Briefly."

"Which one?" Will asked, intrigued by the idea of Hannibal ever playing with common toys.

Hannibal stood up, walked around the bed, and went to sit by Will's side. He looked in the chest for a moment, detailing each item one by one, before reaching in, searching around and getting out of the pile one of the toys.

It was a doll, with blond hair and blue eyes, a fluffy white dress and a bright pink velvety coat. She was wearing riding boots and a headband with a big rose on it.

"You played with it?" Will asked, taking the toy from Hannibal's hands to have a closer look.

"As I said. Very briefly."

Hannibal leaned back, his hands against the wood of the floor to support his weight.

"This one does not come from Uncle Robertus," he said. "I took it from a girl my age that was going to the same school."

"You stole it?"

"Of course not. I would never. I had every intention of giving it back. I simply never had the opportunity. I didn't last long in this school. Or any other. Behavioral reasons."

"I can picture that."

Will tried the limited motions of the arms, played with the hair, replaced the headband. He truly couldn't see what about it had attracted Hannibal's attention.

"Why?" he simply asked.

Hannibal's smile was soft and playful, apparently born from the recollection of a fun memory.

"Those dolls were quite popular when I arrived in France. At least they were during the week I spent in that school. Every girl in my class had one. They were coming with a horse, and the packaging was such that the buyer couldn't see the color of the horse. It was advertised as a surprise for children, and, for mercantile reasons, it was of course playing with the natural urge to collect. There was that rumor going around – fully fabricated, may I add – that the pink horse had been produced in lesser quantity than the other colors, and it was therefore considered rarer. Which, you will understand, means more valuable. They became a statement of the social standing of girls in the playground."

"Let me guess. One had the pink one, she got too braggy about it, so you striped her of her nobility."

"She was perfectly insufferable," Hannibal didn't even try to defend himself. "And not in a creative way."

Will was amused despite himself. It was fully absurd to picture Hannibal involved in playground dramas, yet, weirdly entertaining. He wouldn't admit it, but he truly wanted to hear all the anecdotes of that premise of cruel pettiness.

"Where's the horse?" he asked, looking into the chest.

Hannibal tapped the pink coat with his index finger. Will didn't understand at first. He looked at the coat. Then at Hannibal. Then back at the coat again. Only then did he piece it together.

The coat was the horse. Or had been.

"You... did that?"

"Yes."

Skinned plushies. Will was certain he had written articles about that during his time as a teacher. A classic of early pathological criminality. Nearly a cliché.

"You were very good at sewing," he said instead, and Hannibal smiled with pride.

"I was. I will let you admire how elaborate and well fitted this garment is. Especially considering the poor quality of the original fabric. This is one of my first fashion statements."

"You never gave it back, then."

"No, I was kicked out of school two days later for having broken the jaw of another classmate. I kept the doll. As payment for my craft."

Hannibal took the doll from Will, combed the hair, carefully placed it under the headband, and put the toy back in the chest.

"Genuine question," Will said while putting back the padded top of the bench, "did your uncle have any idea of what you were?"

"No. He knew I could be... turbulent. But that is all. He was very forgiving of my misbehavior."

"Boys will be boys kind of mindset?"

"Not really. Violence brings violence kind of understanding. He knew I had been on the receiving end of abuses in my early years, even if he didn't know of what nature, so he empathized with the brutality coming from me. Never made me feel like good behavior was a condition for his love and care. Ultimately, I was pulled out of school, and the displays of violence stopped."

"And your aunt?"

Hannibal let his hand absentmindedly travel along the edge of the bench, the question sitting in the silence of the room for a while, until a knock on the door put an end to it before Will could.

"You may enter," Hannibal said, standing up and holding a hand out for Will.

The door opened on Chiyoh. Will noticed right away that her hair was wet, as if she had just stepped out of the shower, and her clothes were lighter than usual. It wasn't illogical, with the warm weather they were having, but Cuba's springs were even warmer. Ultimately, Will was more surprised to see her just a bit less guarded and wary than he had ever seen her. On the other hand, he had always seen her on Hannibal's territory. Never on her own.

"I was supposed to find you," Hannibal said, while hoisting Will to his feet. "I hope you will find it in you to forgive us, the car drive has been just a bit more tiring than we had expected."

"It's alright, I took some time as well."

"Please, come in."

Chiyoh did so and closed the door behind her. She then crossed the room, and, with the naturalness of habits, she sat down on the side of the bed, her left leg slightly bent under herself to be more comfortable. It was obvious from the way she had moved in this space that she was on familiar ground, certainly having spent many afternoons sitting on that exact bed. It was hard, watching them interact outside of this castle, to remember that Chiyoh and Hannibal were more than acquaintances or even friends. They were two children who had lived together, played together, grown together. The intimacy they had necessarily developed during those old years was rarely shining through when their adult selves were together, but seeing Chiyoh in the house that had welcomed their youth was making that connection undeniable.

"You want me to give you some space?" Will asked, not wanting to intrude in whatever those two were sharing.

"We don't need any," Chiyoh said before Hannibal could even step in. "Please, stay. It concerns you as well."

Will went to sit on one of the windowsills while Hannibal leaned against the wall in between his husband and his somewhat cousin.

"Do you know what the program for the following days will be?" Chiyoh asked them.

"The funeral's tomorrow," Will said, remembering Hannibal saying so during the drive here.

"We've decided there will be no wake," Chiyoh said. "I know Mr. Lecter had one, but we didn't think it would be necessary for Lady Murasaki. We tried to keep it as simple as possible. No mass as well."

"She was religious?" Will asked.

"No," Hannibal answered. "Neither was Uncle Robertus. But he was coming from certain traditions. He had a very typical funeral. Antithetical with who he was while still alive."

"Funerals are for those who are left behind," Chiyoh said. "And Mr. Lecter was part of a community that needed all the ceremonies."

Will didn't know about Robertus Lecter, but he agreed with Chiyoh. Funerals could do nothing against death. When godless, they could only help the grievers.

"We're the only community who is going to be there," Chiyoh continued. "The four of us. There is no point in bringing wakes and masses into this. We will have the opportunity of a moment with the body, however. You may want to decide whether or not you want to see it."

Chiyoh let a silence slither at the end of her sentence, observing Hannibal who first didn't react and only looked at her when it became obvious she would not continue on her own.

"I will decide," Hannibal just said, not making his stance on the matter known for now.

"After that moment, she will be brought to the Russian Cemetery."

"Russian Cemetery?" Will repeated. "Is there any reason why it must be a Russian one?"

Apart from the soviet occupation of their homeland decades ago, Will wasn't aware of any link between that country and the Lecter family.

"It is its name," Hannibal explained. "Many Russian expatriates, who had fled the Bolshevik revolution, are buried there, and it was nicknamed the Russian Cemetery of Saint-Geneviève-Des-Bois. Uncle Robertus was buried there for no other reason than its close proximity. That is where the family vault has been built."

"Lady Murasaki will rest with him. In the family vault."

Will found that information to be noteworthy but it wasn't the time nor the place to mention it. He would wait until he could be alone with Hannibal.

"There will be a quick ceremony in the Cemetery," Chiyoh said. "Then the funeral will be over."

"We don't plan on staying here long after that," Will told her, as he and Hannibal had discussed that exact topic before leaving Cuba. "The next day, right?"

"Yes," Hannibal nodded. "In the morning or in the afternoon, we are not sure yet. But we will not linger."

"You can stay if you want," Chiyoh said, looking at them both. "For a while. If you need time to..."

"... to mourn?" Hannibal offered to help her find her words.

"... to be with a family."

"Will is my family. I am with a family, when I am in Cuba. Or everywhere he is."

Chiyoh glanced at Will, and Will, for a second, wondered if there was a bit of resentment behind her black eyes. For the bond he had been able to nurture with Hannibal and that she had never truly been able to develop. For the allegiance the cub turned monster had for his new family, that he didn't have for his old one anymore, if he ever had it.

But if such resentment was indeed on her mind, nothing of it could be spotted on her placid face and she went back to Hannibal.

"I am simply saying that you can stay if you want. That castle is yours. At least I suppose..."

"She died childless?" Hannibal asked.

"No, she didn't. She had us."

"I wasn't her child."

It could have been the end of Hannibal's sentence. But Will saw his cruelty coming before it could hit them. In the glimmer in his eyes, in the satisfaction on his lips, in the whole of his demeanor. Will just knew it. Hannibal was about to add 'and neither were you'. Just to hurt Chiyoh. Just for the sake of seeing her react to this slap. He wasn't angry at her. He wasn't bitter. But presented with the opportunity to cut into the flesh, of course he would seize it.

Will jumped in right away, before Hannibal could see his brutality to its end.

"What's the plan for tonight?"

If Hannibal knew that intervention had for sole aim to frustrate him, he didn't complain. Chiyoh, a bit surprised by that sudden change of conversation, took a second to answer.

"Pascal went to fetch some food from a nearby restaurant. We should have dinner soon, if you want to join us."

"Sounds perfect. Hannibal, do you feel like showing me where the closest bathroom is? Wouldn't say no to a shower."

"Actually, I will leave you two to it," Chiyoh said, standing up. "I will let you know when the food is here."

Chiyoh stood up and, on her way out, Will felt her eyes linger on him just a second more than necessary. He didn't know if she had noticed what he had just done for her. Gratitude would be hard to read on her features anyway.

After she had closed the door behind her, Will turned to Hannibal.

"Do you love Chiyoh?" he asked bluntly, not beating around the bush.

"Of course, I do."

"Then why hurt her like that?"

Hannibal didn't ask where that question was coming from. He knew all too well that Will could nearly always foretell his cruelty now. Therefore, he didn't bother to feign innocence and ask what he meant. He simply thought about it for a second. And that was telling a lot about him that he hadn't thought of a reason before. He didn't need one to hurt.

"Because I can," he finally said, with simplicity.

Will had nothing to answer. When had Hannibal ever acted on stronger motive than this one?

"I like Chiyoh," Will said.

"She shot you."

"You gutted me. Your point?"

"No point. Just facts. I am happy you like her. I find her to be likeable as well."

"She needs you, you know. She came to you, asked you to be here. She's been honest. I won't pretend I know her or even truly get her. But it's obvious she wants you by her side while she is burying who she sees as her mother. And who she sees as yours as well."

"The relationship Chiyoh had with Lady Murasaki and the relationship I had with her are vastly different. I do not believe we can truly be by each other's sides, Will."

Will was aware he didn't know enough about the situation to disagree with Hannibal. Still, he would take no pleasure in seeing Chiyoh get hurt. But, ultimately, Hannibal's violence could never be restrained by anyone other than Hannibal himself.

It had been true when he had been a child mutilating his classmates' toys, it was still true today, as he was keeping the past wounds wide open for the sake of it. It was just what

he was.

"There's something she said," Will decided to change the topic. "Something I'm not sure I understand."

Hannibal straightened up and went to sit down by Will's side, on the windowsill.

"Yes?"

"When she told us about all that, in Cuba. She said something. She said that Popil was the one who decided that Lady Murasaki would be buried in Essonne instead of wherever else she was supposed to be buried. You were even surprised that it would be here."

"She never came back. She hadn't been here in more than thirty years."

"Chiyoh just told us Lady Murasaki would be buried with your uncle. In the family vault."

"Yes. What is puzzling you?"

"I just don't get... why. Why did your aunt's current lover decided that she would be buried with her late husband, in a vault where he will not be able to join her after his death? I mean, he could have just let things happen as they were supposed to. But he went out of his way for this alternative to happen. Was he a friend of your uncle?"

"They never met."

"Then why would he do that?"

It sounded incredibly self-sacrificing. And Will would have said so aloud if he hadn't witnessed several times now Hannibal's obvious distaste for that man.

"Maybe he became aware of his doom to remain a second best. He bowed down."

Will was not buying that.

The human values that it took to step back and let a loved one rest in more meaningful arms were the kind that Hannibal could usually appreciate and even admire. From the little he had seen of the man, Will didn't believe that Popil was subject to low self-esteem or crippling

insecurities. Which meant it was out of decency that he had organized that funeral that was fully about the Lecter family, and not at all about his own love story with Lady Murasaki.

Yet, despite that gesture that Hannibal would have normally been receptive to, Popil was still on the receiving end of Hannibal's unhidden disdain. He had said to Will that he found Popil to be underwhelming but Will could tell there was much more going on.

If it wasn't about Popil's character, and it wasn't about Hannibal's expectations, then it meant it had to be about something that had happened between the two men.

And it was obvious it would have to blow up before Lady Murasaki could be put to rest.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter in a few days :)

Aconit Napel

Chapter Notes

Salut les gens !

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 4

Aconit Napel

The threshold of the dining room of every home related to Hannibal Lecter should be crossed with either terror or deference. Even better, with both. That was at least Will's take, but it was an enlightened one.

However, Will wasn't fully certain that this law of the universe was still applicable when there was a stack of take away food piled on the table of said dining room.

His certitude shattered, he stepped in, followed by Hannibal.

Chiyoh, who had just called them, was helping Popil unpack their food and place them on the table so that everyone could reach any and all of the dishes.

"I brought us Indian food," Popil said once he noticed everyone was in the room. "You know that restaurant at Saint-Geneviève? The one next to the old post office. It was still open. Who would have thought..."

"I went there this morning," Chiyoh said, taking the plates and cutlery from Hannibal who had just brought them. "Saint-Geneviève. Nothing looks familiar. The whole city has changed."

"Well, not this restaurant. It sure looked more modern, but it smelled exactly the same. Felt good to find something back. Have you ever eaten there?"

"No," Chiyoh answered. "That will be a first for us."

Now that the table was set – Will having felt perfectly useless the whole time –, everyone began to sit down around it. It was a long table, easily able to accommodate two dozen of guests, so, with only the four of them, half of it was already more than enough. From the corner of his eyes, Will noticed that Popil had sat down on the seat that had been the closest to him and that so happened to be on the right side of the end seat.

A quick glance at Hannibal told Will he hadn't failed to notice that as well. A dangerous gleam in his dark eyes. An indiscernible twist of the corner of his lips. Hannibal was annoyed.

It was something that Hannibal had at heart to an unreasonable extent. It was a tacit rule between him and the universe that Will was meant to be sitting at the place of honor of every single table that was ever crossing his path. It was just how it was. It was simply Will's place in the world, according to Hannibal. Ever since the Fall, and no matter the circumstances, it was the chair Hannibal would pull and stand by until Will would take the seat. Whether or not Hannibal was sitting as the host didn't matter, Will still needed to be treated as the most important person in the room.

Will himself found it to be tedious but he knew there was no way he could fight Hannibal on that. It was doomed to remain a losing battle. If there were two front lines Hannibal would never retreat from, it was etiquette and his adoration for Will.

But here there were. With Popil seated and Hannibal, standing in his back, irritated. Before anything could happen, or before Chiyoh could notice it, Will put his hand on the small of Hannibal's back and gently nudged him toward the other side of the table. Chiyoh took the end seat, Hannibal on her left, and Will sat by Hannibal's other side.

Will squeezed Hannibal's hand one last time under the table but to very little effect. The damage was done, and Hannibal was comfortably settled in his displeasure.

One a brighter side, the food smelled very good, and looked just as tasty. Will was used to eating perfectly prepared dishes, and it was nothing out of the ordinary for him, but it was still always a good feeling than to be on the verge of eating a delicious meal. Hannibal grabbed the carafe and filled the glasses of everyone who wanted some water. Then, each of them reached for the different dishes in front of them, going after their whims, and putting a bit of everything in their own plate.

"How did you know about that restaurant?" Chiyoh asked Popil, after thanking Hannibal for the water. "I thought you used to work in Paris."

"I did. But I stayed nearby during the time I've been working here. Driving from Argenteuil to here every day was too tedious, especially with the hours we were pulling in. I stayed in Evry for a while, in a hotel room. Seen a bit around. Ate a lot of take outs."

"What's Evry compared to Essonne?" Will asked, getting a bit lost with all those names he didn't know.

"Essonne is the department. Evry and Sainte-Geneviève-Des-Bois are cities of that department."

"And which city are we currently in?"

"Neither. This house is to the east of these cities. We are isolated enough to not mind, but, administratively, we are a part of Étiolles. Yet another city. But all of them are very close by."

"It's a... what?" Popil added. "Twenty minutes drive for Sainte-Geneviève? Barely ten for Evry?"

"Something like that, I believe," Chiyoh agreed.

Apparently, they had both decided to try and aim for casual, superficial conversations, and Will was happy to help with that. Even Hannibal added his stone.

"I have noticed that the castle is in perfect condition despite having been abandoned years ago," he said, his eyes following the natural grooves of the perfectly waxed wood of the fine marquetry on the walls. "It has been renovated?"

"Sheba paid for its maintenance," Popil informed him. "She had no plan of moving back but this house remained an important symbol for her, and she wanted for it to be taken care of."

Will was easily able to guess that Sheba must have been either a first name or a nickname for Lady Murasaki. In any case, a name that neither Hannibal nor Chiyoh had ever used for her.

"Are the paintings still there?" Hannibal asked without reacting to the name – though Will knew better than to think no reaction from Hannibal meant no thought. "Or have they been taken away?"

"Most are in galleries," Chiyoh said. "A lot are also scattered around. You know how much he liked to give them away on whims. But some are still here. They are all in the art room. The one he painted for you is in Japan, however. I can make sure it goes to your new home, if you want."

"I would like that."

Hannibal turned to Will, his hand finding the back of Will's chair.

"If you want, I could show you tomorrow."

"Robertus painted?"

"It was his passion and his career. This is what paid for that place. That and inheritance of course. Though, to his defense, my father got the most of it."

"I'd like to see."

"Interested in arts much, Will?"

Popil's question took Will by surprise. Every direct conversation with that man felt weird, as they were only connected thanks to Hannibal. More exactly they were connected thanks to the concept of Hannibal, but they both belonged to very different and disjoint parts of the Ripper's life.

"Well..." Will said, finding back his words, "I can enjoy it. I'm not the connoisseur in the household but I can be interested."

"Who can be the connoisseur when Hannibal is under the same roof?" Popil said, half-jokingly, before addressing Hannibal directly. "I remember, even back then, you were always doodling something."

"Will is cutting himself short," Hannibal added, ignoring the attempt at bringing up old anecdotes. "He is an artist as well. "

"Really? Which art?"

It was asked with more politeness than curiosity and Hannibal answered before Will.

"Staging."

Popil looked at Hannibal. Then Will. Then Hannibal again.

"Is it a metaphor for murder?"

"Art must always remain open to interpretation. In Art, no clear answers."

Popil smiled but it was tinted with some sourness that couldn't be perfectly hidden.

"Ah, that specific smugness of yours," he commented. "You haven't grown out of it, I see. Always the smartest in the room."

"I happen to often be, indeed," Hannibal replied, unapologetic.

Popil took a sip from his glass and turned to Will.

"The first time I interrogated him," he began, in the tone of amusing story times, "he asked me if I wanted him to lie and say I was with him on the day of the murder, so I would have an alibi as well."

Will had to admit, the idea of a thirteen-year-old child being that cheeky in a police station was both funny and infuriating. Knowing that it was Hannibal, Will would have appreciated to hear more of it, but he wasn't absolutely sure what his husband's thoughts were on the conversation, and he didn't want to inadvertently side with Popil rather than Hannibal. Therefore, he kept it sober.

"That's thoughtful of him."

"He was a very thoughtful boy, that's for sure."

"Could we not bring that up again?" Chiyoh insisted. "I don't see the point that this conversation could serve."

Popil leaned back against his chair and picked up his fork again.

"You're right, Chiyoh. We shouldn't."

Hannibal didn't make such statement, but he didn't continue the former conversation either and let it drop on the floor.

"You don't like Indian food?" Popil wondered after a while, noticing that Hannibal hadn't touched any of the different dishes displayed on the table.

Will didn't even have to look to know why Hannibal hadn't reached out. That was the kind of thing one knew about the other when they had been married for a couple of years.

"I rarely – if ever – eat food that has been altered in any way if I did not witness the alteration process."

"You're still like that?"

"I am still like that. Very much."

That was something Will hadn't noticed right away but that had become obvious when they had begun to share every meal. Hannibal was extremely peculiar with everything he would let into his body.

Will could only remember one time when Hannibal had eaten something he hadn't cooked himself, and it was at Mason's table. And knowing Mason and Cordell's plans, it was not unlikely that the pig had actually been prepared in front of Hannibal, to let him know what would happen to him. Apart from that one specific situation, Will couldn't remember Hannibal ever eating something he hadn't cooked, let alone something he hadn't witnessed the preparation of.

It had apparently been a headache in prison, and Hannibal had lost a lot of weight during the first months, even though Alana had eventually given in.

"Sorry, Hannibal," Chiyoh said. "I didn't know it still mattered to you."

"No need to apologize, Chiyoh. To be in good company is enough of a joy."

"I bought some apples when I was in town this morning," she remembered. "It was market day. There are some left in Chef's kitchen, if you want."

"Thank you."

From what he had seen from Popil, Will didn't think the man would trust Hannibal enough to eat anything that had been cooked by him. It was even probably the reason why they were having take outs today. But if Hannibal could skip a meal, they would need, at some point in the following days, to have food that he could also eat. Will hoped it wouldn't be too much of a headache. Was it rude to have two different meals at the same table? Was there anything in the etiquette against that?

"About tomorrow," Popil said, taking Will out of his thoughts. "I talked to some people, called in on some favors. There will be a minimal amount of people involved in the funeral, and none will call the police. But you are still wanted, and there are cities around this place. You'll need to be careful and stay as much as possible in the castle."

"Will and I managed to leave a country on high alert without being bothered by any of the many authorities that were after us. I am almost certain we can handle ourselves. But your concern is appreciated, Inspecteur."

"I'm just saying that there are people around who still know you, Hannibal. People who remember Sheba, and your uncle. If you get arrested here, it won't be simply you and your husband who will be impacted. Chiyoh will be as well. I know you don't lose sleep over her being locked away, but still it would be appreciated if you could mind others. For once."

"I would strongly recommend you to not comment on what is between Chiyoh and I, Inspecteur. You understand us as little as you understood Lady Murasaki and I."

"I don't care about what was between you and Sheba. I care about Sheba. The same's true for Chiyoh. You've done enough to her."

"And Chiyoh would like it if both of you could be silent for once," Chiyoh interrupted, her tone calm yet callous. "I am here, and I can advocate for myself."

"My apologies," Hannibal immediately backed away. "It is terribly rude of us."

"Sorry, Chiyoh," Popil apologized as well, though he had a harder time than Hannibal hiding his frustration at not having been able to go to the bottom of his grievances.

He picked up his paper napkin, wiped his mouth and dropped it on his now empty plate before standing up.

"I have some things to take care of," he announced. "I'll be around if you need me."

Though the dinner had been slowly reaching its end, there was no doubt that Popil was cutting it short to get away. No one stopped him and he walked out of the dining room.

The silence settled, heavy with untold reproaches and, Hannibal, who wasn't interested in them, began to gather the empty plates.

"I will take care of the dishes while I will be in the kitchen," he stated. "Are you done?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"I am."

He put all the plates in a pile, stacked the cutlery on top of it, and picked it up with one confident hand.

"Will, do you need anything while I'm there?"

"I'll be fine, thanks. I'll find my way back to the bedroom."

Hannibal nodded and took the dirty dishes away.

Chiyoh and Will stayed behind, along with the heavy silence. Cute little group, the three of them.

Chiyoh passed the tip of her finger along her nose, closing her eyes as if to keep a looming headache at bay.

"It's not going as smoothly as you expected?" Will asked.

"I never expected it to go smoothly."

She opened her eyes again and leaned back against her chair with a soft sigh.

"Why have them both together here then?" Will wondered. "You don't strike me as someone enjoying the drama."

"I had my share of drama. I am not interested in more of it. But they both loved Lady Murasaki."

"You want to be a guardrail? Make sure they don't end up regretting not coming?"

"I could hardly care less about their regrets."

'Then what is it?' Will nearly asked. But he didn't. He figured it out on his own before the words could leave his mouth.

"You want Lady Murasaki to be grieved."

Chiyoh, called out, looked down on the table where her plate had been a moment ago.

"No one knew her," she said to the empty space. "No one but us. And no one but us will cry her."

She looked up again and met Will's gaze.

"She is gone, and the world needs to pay a price. We are the only ones who can."

"I don't know if Hannibal can really carry grieves. Not to their true weight."

"If he is here, it's enough for me to pretend. That's all I'm asking for, and I don't think it's a lot."

Will also thought it was a very small favor considering Hannibal had taken nearly all of Chiyoh's life away from her. Will loved the man but it was an undeniable fact: the world still had to find a way to make the Ripper pay for anything.

"So, tell me," Will leaned forward, his elbows on the table, his hands crossed under his chin, "what's their deal? I have a hard time figuring it out."

"What did Hannibal tell you?"

"The kind of things Hannibal says. Hermetic half-truths. He said that he finds Popil to be underwhelming, and that's why he doesn't like him. I asked if that has anything to do with him being arrested when he was younger, he said no. But, if Popil was really as unimportant as I've been told he is, then Hannibal wouldn't be as deliberate in his constant opposition. He really doesn't seem to be able to stand the guy. And I've seen him handle people that annoyed him. Seen him talk with Chilton, Mason and the likes. Never seen him so confrontational. By a long shot."

Chiyoh took in that remark, and she seemed to reflect on it for a moment. She had to have noticed as well that Hannibal was uncharacteristically adversarial. Maybe even more so than she had expected.

"That's for sure that Pascal brings forth behaviors that are less… mature. That may play a role. It's not as if Hannibal has many childhood figures still running around. But even then… It's not just disappointment. You'd know too."

"Yeah."

"I can't say I know everything that was and still is going on between them. I missed most of it."

"What have you seen?"

Seeing in Will the only person under that roof that could be on her side, she gathered her thoughts.

"You already know Pascal arrested Hannibal."

"For his first murder."

"Back then, I didn't know he was guilty of anything. Pascal knocked one day at our day with several of his seconds-in-command and they took Hannibal away. It was barely a week after Mr. Robertus' death, and I remember I hated that policeman with a passion. It didn't hold up, however. They had to release him not long after."

"He wasn't able to prove Hannibal did it?"

"No. And I also think Lady Murasaki acted behind the scenes to turn the suspicions away from Hannibal. She sent me to my room after Hannibal was taken away, but I stayed awake. I saw her leave the castle on the old motorcycle, and she came back barely minutes before Hannibal could be brought back as well by the police."

"Popil never discovered that?"

"It's hard to tell what he knows and doesn't know about Lady Murasaki. Especially today. But I know he never doubted Hannibal's guilt. And if he didn't think Hannibal was innocent, it was pretty easy to guess who could have been helping him."

If Popil's first contact with Murasaki was when she had manipulated the police in order to free her – very guilty – adopted son, it was a very strange thing that he had been able to overlook that and start developing feelings for her.

Though, Will guessed he was the last person who could throw that very specific stone...

"And, after that, they didn't see each other until the other murders?" Will wondered.

"They did. When we moved to Paris, after the Castle was sold, Pascal began to see Lady Murasaki a bit more often. He wasn't investigating her or Hannibal anymore, but he would pass by the flat from time to time. He helped Lady Murasaki find a high school for Hannibal since he hadn't been schooled in years. And when he moved on to med school barely months later, Pascal was the one who found him a student room at the faculty."

"He... did that? Why, if he hated Hannibal?"

"I don't think he hated Hannibal back then. I don't know if he liked him, per say, but he was definitely trying to help him. As for why... That is just my take on it, but he already loved Lady Murasaki very much. And Hannibal was a son to her."

"Not hard to guess that Hannibal wouldn't appreciate that at all."

"He didn't indeed. He hated Pascal. Something I didn't understand back then. I was angry at him too, for his accusations, but when I saw what he was doing for Lady Murasaki and us, I couldn't understand why Hannibal was still so hostile."

Will truly didn't need an exacerbated empathy to guess the answer to that.

"His uncle dies. A week later, another man enters the family, spends time with who he sees as his mother, and brings the kind of help a father would provide. Can understand why Hannibal wasn't too pleased about it. Even now, he is still very attached to his uncle. Don't think it was different back then."

"Pascal never acted fatherly toward any of us."

"You had a father, at that time?"

"Yes. I was going back to my family in Japan from time to time."

"Hannibal didn't. Two dead fathers already. He would notice what Popil was doing. And if he didn't already have somewhat positive feelings for the guy, I can see how that would have exacerbated his dislike."

"Pascal still helped him out, even though he knew Hannibal was hating him."

"So that he could get closer to Lady Murasaki. Or did he have any other motivation?"

"Hard to say. I do believe he truly thought Hannibal had a lot of potential, and he didn't want for him to waste it all away. He surely thought that if he was able to give a good life to Hannibal, he would be less likely to turn out… badly. I remember he was always asking how Hannibal was doing at school."

"And he wasn't acting fatherly?"

"It wasn't like that."

Will chuckled but nodded nonetheless.

"You were there," he conceded. "You know better than me."

She seemed to appreciate his admission. With the life she had had, she couldn't be too used to not having her reality be questioned. Will could relate. Gaslighting was a bitch.

Chiyoh and him really had Hannibal in common.

"Things got drastically worse with the... other murders," Chiyoh said, continuing the story. "I don't know much about it. At that time, I had finished my education and I was mostly in Japan. I had some letters from Hannibal and from Lady Murasaki, but none talked about that. I learned about it far later, and I know Lady Murasaki didn't tell me everything. Neither did Pascal. And Hannibal... well, you know how it is with him."

"Yes. I know. What did you gather?"

"Hannibal started going after Mischa's murderers when he was seventeen. A whole group of them. One after the other. Pascal quickly pieced it together. He tried to convince him to stop. Lady Murasaki tried as well. But he didn't. Pascal arrested him a second time. But there wasn't enough proof. He had to be released. It was pretty obvious, at that point, that there was no stopping him. Everything fell apart after that. Lady Murasaki left the country without looking back. I met her again in Japan. That was when I learned he had been arrested and

released, and that he was after Mischa's murderers. I went to Lithuania to try to understand and stop him as well. I was so sure I could succeed where Lady Murasaki had given up. I knew Hannibal. I had grown up with him. We had covered each other's silly disobedience before. Countless time. It was just what we did."

"You found him there, right? In Lithuania. That's when he told you about the murderer."

"The last one. The most important one. Then... Well. You know the rest."

Will didn't believe that man, trapped for decades in the old, abandoned castle, had anything to do with Mischa. But he would never say that to Chiyoh. What would be the point?

"I continued to write to Lady Murasaki, during the years," Chiyoh breathed quietly. "I never told her what I was doing. I was making up travels and joys, because I didn't want her to hate Hannibal for any of this. The same way he lied to her the nights I would sneak out of the castle to go with my friends, I lied to her about the prisoner he was keeping in the basement."

"The prisoner being Mischa's murderer? Or you?"

"I don't know. It didn't matter."

It may have sounded harsh and cruel, but Will hadn't intended it that way, and Chiyoh hadn't received it like an attack either. Actually, she even seemed relieved. She wasn't happy to talk, nor was she eager to let Will in on the family's traumas. But letting them out seemed to be taking a weight off her shoulders. Or maybe simply talking with someone who wasn't Hannibal and who wouldn't be half as cruel - at least not to her. Popil didn't appear to be cruel either, but he also didn't know Hannibal as intimately as Chiyoh and Will.

The Inspector had said so himself. He didn't care about Hannibal. It was a luxury he alone could enjoy, under that roof.

"She told me that Pascal and she had been in contact again, about a couple of years after her departure from France. They seemed fine for each other. Or at least he seemed fine for her. And I was glad she was happy. I loved Mr. Robertus but I knew he wouldn't have wanted his wife to stay alone and grieving for the rest of her life."

"Hannibal never learned about it?"

"I don't know what he learned. We didn't keep any contact. I simply know that Lady Murasaki never spoke to him again. Or of him, really. The first time I heard from him after he had left Lithuania was when he sent you to me."

Will could have argued that he hadn't been sent, that he had gone there on his own volition. But it would be an impossible stand to defend.

"Why did you forgive him?"

He was on Hannibal's side. Fully and irremediably. Some would even say pathologically. But what Popil had said was true. Hannibal had kept Chiyoh prisoner for nearly her entire life. Her resilience was hardly believable.

"I didn't," she told him. "Forgive him. But if I renounce him, with him gone, with Lady Murasaki gone, with Mr. Robertus gone... what will be left of my childhood?"

The vague twist of her lips could have looked like a smile if it hadn't been so weak and empty.

"And Hannibal has taken so much from me, I lived nothing but my childhood. It is all I have."

That was a factual description of reality. Chiyoh had stopped living the day she had stepped out of childhood. And Will was slowly seeing the irony that Hannibal had seen and laughed at.

Hannibal didn't have a childhood. He had been born fully weaned and evolved. A motherless beast. Of course, he had made Chiyoh pay her love for him with her adulthood. So that she would only ever have what Hannibal never got.

He had apparently found his sense of humor very early. A prodigy in everything.

Will closed his eyes and rubbed the painful spot just above his eyes.

He could tell the next day would be exhausting.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: funeral! :)

Pomme Epineuse

Chapter Notes

Salut les gens !

Funeral chapter at last. I'm taking my time.

Also, I'm extremly sick and fully unable to read anything. So I didn't give this chap its last rereading. I will hope that it is still ok enough for you.
Take care and I hope you're having a better week than I!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 5

Pomme Epineuse

"Is that you?"

The early morning of the funeral, Will was in the art room, where had ended the commented tour of the Lecter castle. He was already wearing the formal black pants of the only funeral suit he owned - and that he had bought for that exact occasion, a few days ago. Along with it, the white shirt and black tie were completing the respectful uniform of grief, but he had left the jacket on the arm of the chair by the entrance of the room.

The sun had been up for an hour already, warming the stones of the castle, and it was foretelling a suffocating day. Though, so far, Will was spared from the worst of it, in the shadowed coolness of the art room.

"No, it is my uncle," Hannibal informed him, looking at the painting Will had pointed at. "My mother gifted it to him a week after meeting him."

Will observed the boy represented in the canvas. It was borrowing the codes of illustrious portraiture, but with bold strokes and wild colors, in an impressionist style. The child was holding a black cygnet in his arms, the way old figures would carry dogs or lambs on their representation.

"He's exactly how I would have pictured you," Will commented.

"We looked a lot alike. Even now as adults. But there is a way to tell without the possibility of a mistake."

"What is it?"

Hannibal pointed at one of the boy's eyes. Will examined it more carefully. All he could see was that one was significantly darker than the other. He had noticed before as well, as it was creating a strange asymmetry on the round, childish face, but he had thought it was the fantasy of the artist and the whimsicality of the color choice.

"He had mismatched eyes?" Will finally deduced.

"He had anisocoria. Irises of the same colors but pupils of different sizes. An extreme case of it. One of his eyes looked nearly fully black. A brain injury after a bad fall when he was a child. Luckily enough, the only sequela was cosmetic."

Will looked away and began to slowly walk around, letting his eyes wander on the other canvas as well.

It was a messy room that he was in. At least messy for the standards Hannibal had made him grow used to. The many shelves were collapsing under the weight of the tools and boxes, the floor was stained with old paint marks of every imaginable color. A whole wall was hidden behind a pile of buckets of homemade paint. Canvas, featuring all stages of completions, were placed against each other, in precarious balance.

It was a room that had been shaped after the passionate and colorful genius that it had hosted.

"You liked his paintings?" Will asked, kneeling by one of the rows of canvases.

"Very much. He was one of my major, if late, muse. I already knew how to draw, but he taught me how to use colors."

"What kind of relationship did you two have, before your parents died?"

"We didn't have any. I only knew him by name, and by pictures on my father's desk. We first met when he adopted me. As far as I remember. I can't confidently speak for the years of infancy."

Will moved one of the big paintings and discovered, hidden behind, a smaller one. He had never seen the woman depicted there but he guessed it was Lady Murasaki, bathing in a pond of water lilies, the pink of the flowers and the green of the water highlighting the skin of her breasts and her throat. Long black hair was floating around her, shining under the direct light of the sun.

"She was beautiful," Will said, the quiet and chaste erotism reminding him of Ophelia's.

"She was," Hannibal agreed.

Will put the big canvas back where he had found it and stood up, his knees cracking along. He walked to the only table in the room, that had to have been both a desk and a work top, and he leaned back against it, crossing his arms and looking at the room at large.

"Your mother was a painter as well?"

He could indeed vaguely guess a difference of style between the child's portrait and the other paintings. Though a handful of the paintings piled against the wall seemed to be at a meeting point between that portrait and the otherwise dominating style.

"Yes, she was. Talented in all manners of the art. Unlike my uncle, she never tried to make a living from it. Never had to."

"Too rich to bother?"

"I am guessing. My uncle could have lived comfortably enough without ever working a day. But he had more to prove than my mother."

"To prove?"

"That he was not the unworthy son."

"Your grandfather played favorite?"

"I never met him. He died years before my birth. All I know is that it took my father to fall for my mother for the grandfather to be equally disappointed in both his brilliant son and his rebellious one."

That could have been a beautiful story. The two brothers, opposed by natural inclinations, reunited again after the death of the ancestor. The next generation dabbling in cannibalism was an unexpected twist to the tale…

Hannibal was still by the entrance, having left Will to his contemplative exploration. In the frame of the open door behind him, glimpses could be caught of the sumptuous corridors leading here.

"So, that's always been your life," Will mused, surrounded by the large windows, the luxuriant garden, the high ceiling and the gilding. "From castle to castle."

"Some other decors as well. Though castles make for most of my childhood."

"What other decor?"

"The orphanage. The street, also. Nothing I couldn't find a way out of."

Will could easily picture that. The shine and the respectability of nobility successfully hiding the bits of misery.

"Homelessness is too literal of a take on you, for you to be pleased with it," Will stated. "I guessed you hated everything about it. Not just the worldly."

Something in what he had just said intrigued Hannibal and prompted his curiosity.

"You have experience with homelessness, Will?"

Feeling like he was back in therapy, Will smiled. Though it was fair. He had been questioning Hannibal about his family the whole morning.

"Depends," he replied. "Is a car a home?"

"Sometimes, it has to be."

Talking about it brought to the front of Will's mind memories that had nothing to do with the luxury around him.

"All the money my father could get would go into living expenses. We didn't have any kind of margin. One can't save a dollar when they can barely save themselves. The periods in-between jobs were the poorest. I remember many nights in the old pickup. The cold, I could handle. The quick wash in gas stations, too."

"What couldn't you handle, then?"

"The fear."

That memory, that specific one, it was still vivid in his mind. Embedded in the very structure of his brain, yet emitting a light powerful enough to shine through the fat.

"There was that kid I met, when I was still in kindergarten. A girl. Unbearable. Everything insufferable about children, all gathered in one. She was kind of my only friend, though I couldn't bear her. But, you know, no one could bear me either so I guess circumstances decided for us. She was always bugging me, lying, creating problems. I've spent two months in that school, and it felt like years.

"Once, during one of those rare moments where I could capture some truth from her – not that I was really trying to interact with her anyway – she told me she was in the system. When I asked why... Which, I know I shouldn't have, but I was five... When I asked, she told me it was because her father was too poor to have a house, and the state was waiting for her rich mother to come fetch her.

"Now, with the distance, I think she was lying about that as well. I can only guess, but it seems to me that her father was still very much in her life, and that was her problem. Most certainly, she took that story from another kid in her foster home. But whether or not it was true didn't matter. It sounded realistic enough. That's when I understood that, if anyone were to learn the first thing about me, my father would be taken away. The way my mother had been."

"She has been taken away?"

"No, she just left. She couldn't be bothered. But I didn't know that, back then."

"Your father didn't tell you?"

"I never asked. I knew that, if I had asked, he would have told me the truth, and then I wouldn't be able to lie to myself anymore."

Will looked at the blank canvas at his feet. It was his favorite kind of background. From there, everything could be pictured.

"So you lived in fear of having your home taken away from you," Hannibal said. "Whether in a car or a home, your father was the only real constant in your life."

"The nights we spent in the car, I would often stay awake for hours. Trying to see if anyone was coming. A few times, I was able to spot cops from afar, and hide under the seats. When my father would ask me how I had seen them coming, I would lie. I knew he would be overcome by guilt and a sense of failure if he knew I couldn't sleep. I would make up misbehavior. Confessing to reading my comics in secret, or doing homework I had forgotten. He would never get angry anyway. He knew I had it hard enough, there was no point in yelling at me. And his own father had done enough of that for him to know better."

"He seems to have been a good man," Hannibal stated.

And Will didn't know why, but he felt gratitude when he heard that sentence. His dad had lived a hard and miserable life, and had died in everyone's indifference but Will's. Having someone else acknowledge that his father had values and worth was actually more important to Will than he would have guessed.

"He was," he said, with a smile. "If he had had the financial and emotional means, he would have been very much like your uncle has been for you."

"He didn't have many emotional means?"

"Not really, no. He was not mean, let alone violent. But he was... one to internalize. He was very silent. He didn't have many words, and even less thoughts to talk about. He was convinced he was stupid, and that stupid people shouldn't take up the space."

"What did he think about you?"

"He thought I was brilliant. Always knew I would have a stable job and a house. He lived long enough to see me become a homeowner and a teacher at Quantico. He died a few months later. Wasn't around to see everything go to shit."

"You didn't go to shit, Will," Hannibal said, paraphrasing what had been stated, even though the baseness of the language sounded awkward in his mouth. "From brilliant you became divine."

"He wouldn't have understood that."

"I guess not many would."

"Your uncle?"

"He would have understood bits. But he had a fragile heart. He wouldn't have been able to survive the knowledge."

"We must all be our elders' downfall. Part of life."

"You don't need to convince me of that."

Will wondered if he should question whether or not Hannibal had brought Lady Murasaki's downfall. Then he thought against it. Not today of all days.

Before another topic could come up, a knock on the open door behind Hannibal interrupted them and they turned around to see who it was. Popil was standing in the frame, ready to walk away again.

"Time to go, sons," he simply said before leaving.

For a second, Hannibal looked at the space where Popil had been, as if still receiving the words that had been said.

Then he closed his eyes and slowly breathed out. Still not too fond of the address.

"Age doesn't legitimize everything," he said to himself.

Will walked to him and passed an arm behind his back.

"Let's go. It's nearly over."

Hannibal leaned in to press a soft kiss on top of Will's lips.

"Let's."

"You've decided whether or not you want to see her?"

"I will see her."

"Certain of that?"

"It is but a corpse. Hardly the first one I have seen."

"She isn't just any corpse."

"Not the first 'not just any corpse' that I have seen either."

"True enough."

"Don't forget your jacket, Will."

Chiyoh went with Popil while Will stayed with Hannibal, and the two cars journeyed to the funeral home by the cemetery that would welcome Lady Murasaki's last rest.

Popil had been right. The drive to the city was short and, quickly enough, Hannibal was maneuvering their car into the narrow streets between the old buildings. It was a small city, with all the houses crammed together around a few hubs of activity. It couldn't be hosting more than fifty thousand souls, and that number was appearing even smaller thanks to the many green spaces the municipality had preserved inside its borders. It wasn't rare to see parks, forests and ponds between two pubs, or a large, graveled ground in the middle of which a tall manor was standing above the other houses. There was everything a city needed to not be fully isolated: a train station, a post office, a supermarket; but it was also littered with historical buildings, that made it look far richer than the rest of the city seemed to be. Some of the styles Will could spot around were reminiscent of Robertus Lecter's home, though the bits of forest here weren't as dense, nor the ponds as large as those around the castle.

The population didn't seem very diverse, with mostly white people of a certain age, though there were sometimes a few kids or teenagers, as well as a decent number of working adults. It didn't seem to be a place made for retirement, but it was most likely the natural result of a population that had grown old without caring much for its own renewal.

The cemetery itself was in the southern part of the city, isolated from the living by a strip of park and forest. Hannibal didn't need to follow Popil's car as he seemed to already

know the way and, after a couple of minutes of meandering among narrow streets of cobblestone, the two cars were parked in front of the funeral home.

Will took the sunglasses in the glove box, handed one pair to Hannibal, kept one for him, and stepped out of the car. It was a quiet day. The heavy heat had kept even the boldest of strollers inside, and the street that was drawing the periphery of the cemetery was empty.

The funeral home itself was a large, three-story mansion, with an elegant facade of red stone, and a white structure. A few steps were leading to a brown door of solid wood and, on top of it, on an engraved sign board, in bold white letters, one could read the name of the historical owner.

They didn't have to signal their presence since, as they were climbing up the steps, the door opened on its own on a short man dressed in an impeccable black suit. He seemed old. Not quite as much as Popil but closer to him than to Hannibal or Chiyoh. He had a straight back and tensed shoulders and, the second he stood in the doorframe, his worried eyes found Hannibal's tall silhouette.

He was doing a very poor job at hiding his anxiety and sweat was visibly beading down his temples, his mustache slightly trembling. Popil sped up his pace to arrive at the door before anyone else and he warmly greeted the man with a few words in French. While he was being spoken to, the man's eyes continued to dart on Hannibal, making the reason for his discomfort fairly obvious. However, after a moment, he said a couple of sentences to Popil who seemed to be thanking him, amicably pressing his shoulder.

The funeral director stepped back and Popil gestured to everyone to step forward. They didn't idle in the hall and, as the director was getting back to his office, Popil walked up the main corridor to access a room on the other side of an open arch.

There wasn't any coffin there, or anything to welcome a large number of guests. It was a small room, with a few comfortable chairs and small tables here and there. Generic pieces of art, showing mostly nature and landscape, were hung on the wall, and white and yellow flowers were decorating the surfaces. On the wall on the opposite side of the arch, there was a unique door, the window on the wood panel obscured by a thick curtain.

"You want to go first, Hannibal?" Chiyoh asked.

Popil sat down on the closest chair, not arguing against the order of the visits. Hannibal simply bowed his head in acceptance and held his hand out for his husband. Will took it, and together, they walked to the next room.

It was smaller than the former one, designed to welcome small groups and to privilege intimacy over display.

There were no windows, and the lights were dim and with soft and warm orange hues. There was an abundance of flowers decorating the wall, and there was on the floor a thick carpet that aimed at making the space more welcoming and comfortable. The only real piece of furniture however was the bier on which a mahogany casket had been left open.

Following Hannibal's lead, and still gripping the hand in his own, Will stepped closer.

The head panel was resting against the wall, offering a viewing of the body placed on the white silk lining. The pillow, of the same color and fabric as the valance, was propped up to let the light fall on the face of the departed.

Lady Murasaki was resting there, and after having heard and catch so many snippets of her, Will finally met her in full.

She was a woman who had lived a long existence. Her face was displaying the stigmata of life, her skin having grown too large for her own body. Long wrinkles were running along the structure of her face, enlightening its natural shape and curves. Her long hair hadn't changed a lot from the painting Will had seen. It had gained silvery strands and reflections, but it still looked like a dark halo spreading around her. There was a peace on her features that death couldn't have brought alone if a life of wisdom hadn't done its part beforehand. She was wearing a dark green dress that didn't have to do much to display the nobility of her former bearing.

The way she was resting now, with the quietude of her posture and the beauty of her face, was reminding Will of the painting again. And she was in death as at ease as she had been in water.

Instinctively, Will brought his hand to Hannibal's shoulder, caressing the soft fabric of the jacket. He looked up but nothing of Hannibal's thought could be seen on his perfectly inanimate face.

"They didn't do her makeup in a way she would have done."

Hannibal had said that without any apparent anger, or sadness, or disappointment. He was simply stating a fact.

Whether his emotions were buried deep under his brain, and they couldn't reach the surface, or they were on the surface and too far away to reach the depth, Will couldn't tell. He had no idea what Hannibal was thinking or feeling. Which was an uncomfortable situation to be in. One that was threatening to bring back bad memories.

"Hannibal?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind talking to me?"

"To tell you what?"

"Anything."

Hannibal's slow, hermetic eyes left Lady Murasaki to fall on Will. Will turned away from the body as well and passed both arms behind Hannibal's back, his crossed hands resting against the curve of the small of the back.

"What are your thoughts?" Will whispered.

"I always have too many of them. By the time it would take me to voice them, others would be born and die. You know that."

Hannibal rested his hands on Will's arms, observing his husband's face and worry with great care.

"Please, do not fret, Will. I am not devastated. How could I, with you by my side?"

His hands traveled up Will's shoulders and behind his back, bringing him to his chest. Will tightened his hug and placed his head on the hollow of his husband's neck.

For a moment, they remained there, in each other's arms, a step away only from the cold and lifeless mother.

"I am trying to find out if I have any regrets," Hannibal finally said after a while, his low voice vibrating in his chest, against Will's cheek. "If there is anything I would have liked to

do differently. Any small details of the story that could have used an erratum."

"And? Are you finding anything?"

"There was pain. There was waste. But the second I dabble with 'what if' scenarios, one hits me in the face harder than any other. What if anything done differently were to change the ending? And there is nothing regrets can hold on to, after that. I would never jeopardize the felicity we now have, even in my mind alone. There is no game that would be worth it."

Will breathed in Hannibal's heady perfume. He had no idea how their story would end. Probably in a downpour of bullets and blooddrops, with pieces of broken hearts shattered around.

But it didn't matter. The suffering of the past and the future were all meaningful and beautiful, when they were the result and the premise of their present bliss.

"Maybe there is one," Hannibal said, resting his chin on top of Will's head, his eyes on the corpse by their side. "One small, insignificant regret. A detail really. A base one."

"What is it?"

"I would have liked for her to meet you."

Will turned his head the other way, keeping it on Hannibal's shoulder but with his eyes now looking at Lady Murasaki's peaceful face.

"You think she would have liked me?" he asked, though it was not one of his very few worries.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Acceptance is not what it would have been about."

"What would it have been about?"

"Bragging. I would have liked to display you."

Surprised by the answer, Will straightened up. His body was still against Hannibal's but he was now able to look up to watch the face a few inches above his.

"Do you know the last words she said to me?" Hannibal asked, rhetorically.

"No."

"That there was nothing in me to love."

"Oh. Ouch."

Will wasn't sure what he was supposed to add after that. It seemed painful, maybe even traumatic for Hannibal. But he was clearly decades too late to do anything about it.

"Do you love me, Will?" Hannibal asked though he knew the answer full well.

"The whole of you. Against my better judgement."

Hannibal's smile couldn't be described by any other word than 'victorious'. As if smugness had split his face from cheek to cheek and that hubris and vanity were oozing out of that gaping wound. It was a face of triumph one could only have when they were winning against life itself.

Hannibal always had everything going his way, and he knew it, and he loved it.

"I would have liked her to know," he said, his eyes shining with adoration for Will and for himself. "She was so convinced I was dooming myself to a life of darkness. With no hope for happiness and warmth. And now, she is lifeless and cold, while I am in your arms. How petty is that, Will?"

"I would say reasonably petty."

"Reasonably?"

"Compared to the context, yeah."

"You don't have her version. You will never have it."

"And I don't care. She's not you. That's not through her eyes that I want to see the world around me. Since when are you expecting impartiality from me, Hannibal? You spent years trying to undo my biases so you could replace them with yours."

Hannibal smiled, not having any opposition to offer to that fact. He leaned in and gently kissed Will's lips, tasting the love and victory on that mouth that no one had believed could one day be his.

"So that's what this will be?" Will asked, entangling his hands so they could rest on Hannibal's hips. "One final 'I told you so'."

Hannibal seemed happy about the idea. For barely a second. Then he glanced at the open casket, and his smile faded away, his face sobered up and returned to its characteristic placidness.

It was still his mother. And she was dead.

"I fear it wouldn't be very satisfying," he admitted to himself.

"Yeah, maybe not a bright idea."

Hannibal was observing the maternal figure with the same lack of expression he had had before his display of pride. Back to silenced thoughts.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Hannibal," Will repeated once again.

Hannibal stepped out of Will's embrace and walked closer to the casket.

"Thank you, Will."

His hand came to rest on the top of the side panel, over the elaborate drapery of the extendover.

"A lot of studies have been conducted on the benefits or lack thereof of viewing the body of the departed loved one. Very few have wondered about the place of touch in the grieving process. Yet touch is how we first discover life. How else are we expected to make sense of death?"

"Touch and taste."

"In that case, taste would be severely upset by embalming fluids. So is smell. Spoiled."

Hannibal leaned forward and laid a kiss on top of his aunt's forehead. His lips lingered on the cold skin for a few seconds, before he finally stepped back, his eyes closed, his hands safely on the silk.

Kisses were between touch and taste. Death had been intimately explored by Hannibal. Over and over. Was this body feeling any differently?

"You want to know what I have on my mind, Will? What thought I can rip off my brain."

"Yes."

Hannibal turned to Will and whispered his secret.

"I can't help but know that, if it had been me, I would have displayed her in a more beautiful and meaningful way than that."

And he was right. Of course.

But nothing could be done about that. Because there were other pawns on the board. Some Hannibal didn't want to sacrifice just now. And they were depending on that funeral.

"Chiyoh wouldn't appreciate your work," Will felt forced to state.

"No, she wouldn't. But you would, wouldn't you?"

"Probably. That's not the point, though. You can't let two of your oeuvres encroach on one another. Your whole point with Chiyoh was to leave her nothing but her childhood. Your aunt is part of that. You committed, you have to leave her to Chiyoh."

Will was using Hannibal's words to support Hannibal's logic. He knew how to influence that chaotic mind, and he didn't want to see Chiyoh be more wounded by that funeral than she already was.

Hannibal conceded that win to him.

"You are right. That would be unjust. And not in an amusing fashion."

Hannibal replaced one strand of hair and stepped back. Letting go of the casket and of the body.

Will took his hand, and they left the room.

After them, Popil went to visit his life partner. He spent nearly ten full minutes in the private room. Sitting by the side of the woman with whom he had envisioned sharing his old days. Then, it was Chiyoh's turn. She made it quick, burning. Like a ripped band-aid. When she came back, she didn't say a word, she didn't exchange a glance. She passed by Hannibal and Popil, not acknowledging any of them, and she exited the funeral home.

The second part of the ceremony happened quicker than Will had expected, and his senses and thoughts, numb and dull, could barely pick up anything behind the veil of brain fog. The heat was exhausting, the sun weighing down on them with all its mass. Everything felt slowed down by the lack of air and freshness. The silence was nearly as heavy as the heat. Hannibal, Popil and Chiyoh were all in their thoughts, living very different griefs that couldn't find a common ground on which they could meet. Will felt outside of it, looking at the ceremony from the back of his mind. He kept his arm around Hannibal but he wasn't sure the man was truly feeling anything.

No one made any speech. None had anything to say to the other grievers. And when the casket was brought down the steps of the vault and disappeared in the darkness, it seemed like, with it, it was the opportunity of a meaningful moment that was being buried.

None of them were ready. They all had their anger and their vexation that they didn't wish to let out. They were all convinced, rightfully or wrongfully, of being alone and unwanted by others. And the consequence was that their goodbye could only be superficial. Shallow. It would have been a strategic mistake to put anything sensitive, anything of themselves into that grief, when others could see it and hurt it.

Lady Murasaki's body was taken by the soil without tying any of the loose ends left above the ground.

Once the ceremony was over, they all remained behind, unsure of what to do. Nothing felt like it was over.

Yet it was.

"You wondered if you had any regrets about the past," Will said to Hannibal, his voice low enough to be for them alone. "Make sure you don't have any in the present."

"Did you cry at your father's funeral?" Hannibal asked, unprompted.

"Yes."

"Good for you. And good for him."

It wasn't sarcastic or ironic. Certainly not mocking. It was genuine. Hannibal was happy Will had cried. But it was obvious he himself wouldn't.

"Do you want to meet my uncle?" Hannibal wondered, instead of commenting further on the former topic.

"I… fail to see how I could."

"It will require a bit of abstraction, that is true."

Hannibal walked to the vault and opened the grey steel door. Will, who had followed him, stopped at the threshold.

"Is it allowed?"

"There is my name on it."

Hannibal stepped back and held the door open for him. Will hesitated for a second before sighing and moving forward. On the other side of the door, there was a narrow set of stairs of only a few steps that were leading underground. That space under the surface allowed the vault to be much bigger inside than it looked like on the outside. But it was still a place made for the dead, and it was barely wide enough for two adults to stand shoulder to shoulder.

The walls were made of stones, and holes had been prepared to welcome the family members. One of them was filled with a casket, as the marble stele had yet to be placed to

seal the cavity. Once he was at the same level as the decaying corpses, Will looked at the commemorative plate on the marble stone under Lady Murasaki's resting place.

The name of Robertus Lecter was written in bold letters, with a couple of sentences written in French underneath, as well as dates of birth and death.

So there lied the genius for which Hannibal had such a pure respect, uncharacteristic of him. The man that had been spared the Ripper's disdain and boredom. Someone of Will's kin, in a way.

As for Lady Murasaki, Will didn't know where she stood on the spectrum. Like every parent from psychoanalysts' wet dreams, the father had been absent enough to be blameless, and the mother present enough to be both a nurturer and a destroyer. And if only Hannibal had had anything in him that could be nurtured or destroyed, the whole world would have been different.

"Have you ever come back here since his burial?" Will asked and, not receiving any response, he checked the stairs.

Hannibal was there, at the bottom of them. But his eyes were not on Will nor on the stele. He was looking at something else, a barely noticeable frown on his face. Barely noticeable for most. But coming from Hannibal, it was more than telling. It was worrying.

Will turned his head to see what Hannibal was looking at. It was another stone. The only other one. Sealing one of the cavities, though the one underneath it was still free and open. There was no name engraved, nothing to indicate who was behind the marble.

"What is it, Hannibal?"

"That is what I would like to be told, Will."

"Who's there?"

"Supposedly? Me."

Before Will could question that statement, a shadow was cast inside the crypt, coming from a silhouette standing in the doorframe.

"Chiyoh and I are leaving. If you want to come with us..."

"Inspecteur Popil?"

"Yes?"

"Would you mind coming down here? For a brief moment. Your investigating mind could be of help."

Popil hesitated. Nothing appealing in the idea of walking down a crypt at the Chesapeake Ripper's request, but he finally did it and joined them at the bottom of the stairs.

The space was now crowded but, Popil having remained by the stairs, they were all able to stand and see each other.

"What is it?" the retired inspector asked.

"I hope you can tell me."

Though he was facing Popil, his hand was still against the nameless marble ledger stone. Popil finally noticed it, his expression betraying his gradual understanding, and he sighed, putting his hands in his pockets and readying himself for what was to come.

"You were removed," he said, his gaze not waving away.

"Removed?"

"You won't be buried here after your death, Hannibal."

Oh.

Will was slowly getting what was happening. And it was not going to end painlessly. He clenched his teeth, waiting for the impact.

"According to what?" Hannibal questioned.

"According to me. I removed you, son."

To his defense, Popil didn't back away. He faced Hannibal without shaking and wavering, perfectly imperturbable.

Impressive, given that Popil knew what Hannibal was.

"And under what name, Inspecteur Popil, what authority do you think it is your place to decide on such matter?"

Hannibal was also strictly calm. Nothing inflecting the tone of his voice or the straightness of his back. Not that this quietness was not foreshadowing, in its own way, the storm to come.

"I care for that family," Popil simply replied.

"You care for it? How kind-hearted of you."

"Yes. I care. And if we're judging on actions alone, I care more than you ever did Hannibal."

"Please, I would love to hear you get to the bottom of that reasoning."

"Really? You want to go down that road, son? Where do you want me to start? At Chiyoh? At Sheba? At your family name?"

"You know what I find funny, Inspecteur Popil," Hannibal cut him, unmoved by the list of his victims. "A true laughing matter."

He snapped his fingers to gather focus on his hand and then pointed at the open cavity under the sealed one.

"That," he said. "Open. Waiting. That is just ludicrous."

Hannibal went back to Popil, standing as tall as him, as calm as him.

"Tell me what it looks like," he said. "That beautiful family picture that you draw in your head. How did you imagine it would go? That on one hand, you would keep me away and on the other you could pick up my sister's body? That you could take her from the soil under which I buried her and put her to rest between walls that won't have me."

He was slowly getting closer to Popil who wasn't stepping back.

"You were so eager to carry her ghost, Pascal. You cared so much it took you barely a week to utilize it against us. You promised Lady Murasaki you would find her body. You didn't. Years of promises, still no delivery. You promised me you would avenge her. Bring justice."

"I would have," Popil argued, and his voice was now barely keeping its intensity quiet. "If you had backed down, if you had stayed with your aunt, and cared for her like she had cared for you, I would have brought them to justice."

"No, you wouldn't," Hannibal stated, the softness of his voice poisonous. "Because you are no one. Because you can do nothing. You would have been to them what you have been to me. Entertainment. And the result of all that, is that you will stay with not one, but two empty tombs, Pascal. You will never find her. Never deliver what you have promised. But I am guessing you are now used to leaving Lady Murasaki unsatisfied..."

"And how happy does that make you? How fulfilled and accomplished? To know how everyone hated you at the end. How rancorous their last thoughts were. She was your aunt goddamn it. She gave you everything. And you're still the same little piece of shit you were at thirteen years old."

"What is truly pathetic, Pascal, is how unable you are to accept your own insignificance. That was true back then, it is true right now. You simply do not matter. You tried to. You craved for what was more than you. You clumsily courted it. You kissed it when it became too bored to reject you. But deep down, you know it. Greatness is not a sexually transmitted virtue."

"Don't talk of her like that! Don't you dare! You have no right!"

"I know you are aware. I know you are unable to lie to yourself. Not that much. You are perfectly conscious that, even at the very end, you didn't matter to her. You were an underperforming place holder. You know, as much as I do, who she truly loved. Do you want me to say it, Pascal? Do you want me to voice the truth and..."

The sentence was never finished.

Popil's fist flew through the air and hit Hannibal right in the jaw. Carried away by the momentum, Hannibal fell backwards, his head smashing against the ledge stone, leaving a splatter of blood where a name should have been.

Right away, lights and sounds flashed through Will's brain.

Blood under the moonlight.

Hannibal, shot down, looking up at him.

The terrible injuries, the death and the sick.

Without a single coherent thought, without any care for the argument at hand, Will jumped in between the two men. Standing in front of Hannibal, he grabbed Popil by the front of his jacket and, with his other hand, he punched him right in the cheek. Answering a blow with a blow.

Popil stumbled back but, more resilient than his old age could have let anyone guess, he caught himself by grabbing the edge of the closest cavity and he was able to stay on his feet. Before he could take a step forward though, Will warned him.

"If you touch him again, I'll beat the living shit out of you."

He had kept his voice cold, low, controlled, but his brain was made dizzy by the urgency and the violent protective instinct growling at the front of it. Hannibal's blood was staining the soil, and Will was ready to fucking kill if it came to it.

Popil heard the bestial threat and stepped back, his eyes not leaving Will. That was at that moment that Chiyoh, alerted by the commotion, rushed down the stairs.

"What is h..."

Her question died in her throat when she saw the scene around her. Hannibal kneeling on the floor, Popil clutching the wall, and Will, standing in between, his fists clenched, his breath short.

She met Will's eyes for a second, and she understood. She looked at Popil. At Hannibal. Then at Lady Murasaki's casket. Not yet sealed away. And she breathed:

"You disgust me."

That was all she had to say to any of them. She turned away and walked up the stairs.

"Chiyoh, wait," Popil called, but she was gone.

He straightened up, presented his hand, palm up, to Will, as a sign of peace and appeasement. And then, without a glance for Hannibal, he walked away.

The vault was silent again. Only hosting dead bodies and death lovers.

Will went to kneel by Hannibal's side. Blood was dripping on the left side of the man's face, but he was perfectly conscious and well, and Will felt his heart slow down.

Hannibal was well. He was alive. Still undefeated. There was no dragon to slay.

It was just a funeral.

Chapter End Notes

Three chapters left. We're getting to the end.

Souci d'Eau

Chapter Notes

Salut les gens !

Time to get to the ending, now that the funeral is done...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 6

Souci d'Eau

The blood was following the natural arch of the eyebrow, the curve of the temple, the relief of the cheekbone before pouring down the jaw and plummeting through the air. Splashing on the white shirt a few inches lower.

Hannibal was driving the car, his eyes on the road, his two hands on the wheel, and the red stain growing on his shoulder. Will was observing the rivulet of blood with a mixture of anger and tenderness. It shouldn't have been spilled, but now that it was there, it looked lovely.

"We'll get that fixed," he nonetheless announced without leaving any place for argumentation. "There's a first aid kit in the bathroom, isn't there? I think I saw it the other day."

"There is."

"Then once we're home, I'll take care of that."

They shouldn't be too far away now. Barely a handful of minutes if the first drive was anything to go by. They didn't have Popil's car to guide them anymore, but Hannibal knew the way as well, guiding him through the narrow rural roads without hesitation.

"What was the plan with him?" Will wondered, not needing to specify who that so called 'him' was. "Apart from pissing him off and making him lose his shit. Which, well… it worked, I guess."

Hannibal slowed down to give way to the right. The driver, though she was well within her rights to pass by them, made a quick gesture of the hand to thank them for their courtesy and Hannibal answered just as politely.

"That would be a fine enough plan," he said, after the other car had passed them and he could resume his drive. "Amusement is an aim on its own."

"He kept it together for a while."

"He did. He has always been a very collected man."

"Not prompt to violence."

"Prompt, no. But he can rely on it when pushed. I would know."

That little added remark at the end was the kind of thing Will had learned not to disregard when it was coming from Hannibal. It was often where the cannibal pun would be hidden. Or the foreshadowing of upcoming cataclysms. Both being distressingly hard to tell apart, most of the time. On this specific occasion, however, it was different. It was neither.

"You've witnessed it?" Will frowned, wanting to get to the bottom of it.

Hannibal smiled to himself, finding something funny about that question.

"You can say that."

Picking up on Will's silent query, he elaborated.

"After the second murder, the night he brought me to the police station once again. Not yet arresting me but fancying a talk. He wasn't too happy. He thought the first murder was a one-time situation. Justified by the fact that the victim had killed my uncle. That was why he had

let me get away with it. He thought it could be read as righteous. But then the second murder. And he understood that righteousness had nothing to do with it. And that I was monstrous. That all his sweet, fatherly efforts to put me back on the right track would remain unsuccessful. Nothing but a waste."

"What did he do?"

"He couldn't do much, really. But what he found sad at first, he then found infuriating. And terrifying. Brought me to his office, certainly hoping to gauge just how much of a danger I was to his dear Lady Murasaki. When I didn't answer, he beat me to a pulp. Trying to get anything out of me other than a laugh. Trying and failing, that goes without saying."

Hannibal had a soft expression on his face, reminiscing that memory with a strange tenderness.

At first, Will didn't comment. Observing Hannibal in a telling silence, as his thoughts were reluctantly gravitating around what had just been said.

"What is it, Will?" Hannibal asked, while looking at him in the rearview mirror.

"You... can't tell?"

"Can't tell what?"

"What's wrong with it?"

Hannibal seemed to not get what Will was hinting at.

"What is wrong with killing a man and getting caught?"

"No. I mean… yeah, that too. But that's not what's really bothering to me."

Hannibal thought about it but then required some more guidance.

"Would you mind elaborating?"

"It's just that... How old were you, when that happened?"

"Fifteen."

Hannibal still wasn't piecing it together. Will didn't know if it was really up to him to voice it. But Hannibal would clearly not do it on his own.

"It's just that... it sounds a bit like abuse."

He was saying 'a bit' as a shameless euphemism to spare Hannibal's strange incomprehension.

"It is nothing like that," Hannibal said, apparently very amused by the concept.

"But it is, though."

"Will..."

Hannibal held out his right hand, his left one still on the wheel. Will instinctively grabbed it. Hannibal kept his eyes on the road, but his finger caressed Will's wrist.

"By that time, I had already killed twice," Hannibal explained. "The first one, I beheaded him and offered the head as an offering to spirits I didn't believe in. The second one, I carved out his cheeks and ate them with wild mushrooms next to his cooling body. Are you seeing my point?"

Hannibal brought Will's hand to his mouth and kissed it with a gentleness that, evidently, he hadn't showed to his first two victims.

"I was very much not a child," he concluded, answering his own question. "And he was not punching down on me. If anything, he was punching not only up but also way over his head. A David unable to wield anything resembling a staff sling, leaving Goliath to his mocking laughter."

Will wondered how less fucked up Hannibal would have ultimately been, if it hadn't kept piling up on him. Not just his sister, but the orphanage, the deaths, the violence... He

didn't know just how much of Hannibal's irredeemable monstrosity was written from the start and how much could have been softened, if not prevented.

"It doesn't really matter," Will ultimately concluded. "What was even the point of doing that?"

Hannibal let go of Will and used his right hand to shift gear as they were entering the garden of the castle.

"For him? I was living close to Lady Murasaki. He certainly wanted to know just how dire the situation was. He needed to rip answers out of me."

"Have you ever hurt her?"

"Physically? No, of course not. She was family."

"And mentally?"

"If you were to ask him, he would certainly tell you that I did."

"And if I were to ask her?"

"Good luck with that."

"And you?"

The car stopped in a creaking sound of tires against gravel.

"All I can say for sure is that it has never been my aim."

It wasn't really answering the question. Yet his tone was letting Will know that nothing else would be added and they both unfastened their seat belt and left the car. Popil and Chiyoh had already arrived, and the entrance door was unlocked.

"I'm gonna fetch the first aid kit," Will said as he was already starting to walk away. "Wait for me."

Will was slowly starting to figure out the general layout of the castle, but there was still some of it he hadn't visited yet, all thanks to missing out on the tour of the former day to enjoy a nap. Hannibal had showed half of it this morning, but the upcoming funeral had rushed it a bit, and they had to skip a lot of the different rooms and wings. The result was that he wasn't efficient in his navigation, only walking through portions and corridors he already knew in order to reach his destination.

While he was in the hall, past the entrance arches, he spotted Popil in the living room. The old man was sitting alone on the couch, lost in thought, a frown darkening his face. That wasn't the only thing darkening his face, though, and a nasty bruise was spreading on his cheek. He had poured himself a big glass of cold water and, in between sips, he was using it to put pressure against his cheek to stop the blue growth. However, his gestures seemed fully automatic and there was no doubt that his mind was not on his injury at all.

Will left him to his ponderings. He didn't harbor many ill feelings for the man.

Ever since the Fall, and the extensive and life-threatening injuries Hannibal had suffered, Will had trouble stomaching the idea of anyone but him wounding this man. Especially physically. And hitting his husband in his presence was certainly the worst idea one could have. But, on the other hand, he was fully aware that it had all been exactly what Hannibal had wanted. Each of the words said in the vault had aimed at getting Popil to lose it. And who could ever truly go against Hannibal's will?

The beating when the Ripper had been fifteen years old? It was a bit of a different matter. Will didn't know for sure how he felt about that. But it was too vague, too hesitant to be a true anger. And if Hannibal had been as dangerous back then as he was now... There was something unsettling in hurting a monster in a child's body. But Will, when he had been afraid for Alana's safety, had been ready to kill to keep Hannibal away from her. It was obvious Popil loved Lady Murasaki more dearly than Will had ever fancied Alana.

So, Will didn't think there was much he could say to Popil. The problem was between the old man and Hannibal. Will was only there to answer blow for blow, there was no point in initiating anything.

However, he also met the last temporary inhabitant of the castle as, after having fetched the first aid kit, he was making his way back to the stairs. One of the doors on the main upstairs hall was half open and, passing by it for the second time, Will realized that Chiyoh was inside. She was sitting on a large bed, her untied hair falling like a dark waterfall on her shoulder, hiding her face away.

By the end of the bed, on the floor, there was an open suitcase, with men's shirts sticking out, making Will guess that it was Popil's and that this room was the master

bedroom. He hesitated a second on the threshold, not certain how to act, but he finally knocked on the door. Quietly enough that it could be ignored.

But it wasn't. Chiyoh pushed her hair back and looked over her shoulder to see who it was.

"Yes?"

Her eyes were dry, but the anger and disappointment could still be spotted in some of the dark reflection of the black irises.

"Uh... Nothing," Will realized. "Just, you know, checking on you."

"When exactly did we become friends?"

It wasn't asked as an insult or a sarcastic way to make him back off. But it was a legitimate question, however. When had they?

"Well, we're not really friends," Will said, walking into the room, the first aid kit under his arm, his other hand in his pocket. "Doesn't mean I have to be an ass."

Chiyoh didn't argue against that statement and Will came to stand by the bed.

"I'm sorry for punching him," he said.

He wasn't sorry. Not really. But he was sorry Chiyoh had received the punch as well. The woman swept away his apology with a vague gesture of her hand.

"Out of all three, you are the one I am the least angry at. As long as you are not here to defend someone who doesn't deserve it."

"That's not my plan."

On the bedside table, Will noticed there was a framed picture. In faded colors, it showed two children sitting on the step of the castle. The girl, taller than the boy by a good foot, had a protective arm wrapped around his shoulders.

"I simply wanted one day to be about her, " Chiyoh said. "One day only. Hers. But everything in this family must end up being about him."

Looking at the picture, hearing that sentence, Will couldn't help but think of all the times such words had been unfairly said by jealous souls about their little sibling.

No amount of bad faith could have doubted the fairness of Chiyoh's statement, however. It wasn't even fairness. It was factuality.

"He takes up space," Will commented.

And it was undeniable as well.

"Hannibal is so convinced he is a sophisticated, complex monster," she said. "The truth is that, often, he is nothing more than a basic asshole."

Chiyoh gathered her hair and tied it up. Her eyes fell on what Will had under his arm.

"Is he alright?" she asked, reluctantly.

"He is. Just a bit of blood. He hit his head, but he said he is fine."

"I thought nothing could take me by surprise me, anymore. But Pascal should know better than to answer Hannibal's provocations. He should know we cannot win."

Chiyoh hadn't been there and though it was true that Hannibal had started the conversation and turned it into a confrontation, there was some context prior to that decision

of his. Some context Popil was guilty of. Will wondered what Chiyoh would think of the sealing of Hannibal's grave in the family vault. On the other hand, he didn't know how aware of it she was, and he had no desire to be the one breaking the news. It just wasn't his place.

He kept silent on the matter and brought something else up.

"Did you know that there was some prior history of violence between Hannibal and Popil?"

"What do you mean?"

"Some beating having taken place a while ago. Hannibal just told me about it."

Chiyoh detailed Will's face, as if she could pick up from it bits of the story he wasn't telling her. But he had shared the whole extent of his knowledge on the matter.

"When?"

"I don't know. Hannibal was fifteen."

She lowered her head, focusing on her thoughts for a moment.

"If I had known back then, it would have mattered. But now..."

She stood up from the bed and slowly made her way to the window.

"How many people had he already killed by then?"

"Only two."

Chiyoh laughed at that sentence though it didn't sound joyful.

"Only two," she repeated.

She put her hands on the windowsill and looked outside, the bright sky lightening her black eyes.

"What did he say about it?" She wondered.

"Hannibal? He said it was fair."

"And what do you think?"

Will crossed his arms, not sure he truly had a set opinion on the matter.

"I think Hannibal would certainly deem that the horrors that happened to him as a child were fair. I don't believe his sense of fairness is really... applicable to anything. He often has it confused with intellectual pleasure. For him, if something adds an interesting meaning, it will always be fair enough."

"Yes, he has always been like that."

Her eyes lingered on the picture on the bedside table, but she quickly looked away.

"You have something to do, don't you?" she said. "I wouldn't want to distract you."

"Yes, I'll go. Once again, I'm sorry it turned out that way, Chiyoh. It sucks."

Not having anything more useful to say, Will walked away.

He expected to find Hannibal waiting for him downstairs, but the floor, or at least what Will knew of it, was empty. It was while checking in a small study half hidden under the stairs that Will spotted him through a narrow window overlooking the lake on the side of the castle. Hannibal was standing by the water, under the heavy heat of the sun.

Will struggled to find a backdoor but he finally found one in the kitchen and exited the cool and shadowed atmosphere of the castle to get outside. The sun rays began burning his

skin right away, nearly as badly as they would in Cuba. Essonne was living a harsh period of drought and the grass around was slowly turning a sad hue of yellow. Most flowers were still brave, displaying insolent colors, but a few days of that weather and their youth would be fully withered.

Hannibal heard Will approach and he didn't have to turn around to address him.

"This is where I discovered my love for swimming," he informed Will.

Hannibal was a surprisingly athletic man, for someone so precious, but swimming was one of the physical practices he enjoyed the most.

"In my homeland, the summers were not that warm. And the arm of water behind the orphanage meant death by cold and drowning for the malnourished, unsupervised children we were. It is here that I learned that it could also protect and soothe. Lady Murasaki taught me to float then swim. I spent my summers under those waters."

Remembering the painting, and how peaceful Lady Murasaki had appeared to be between water lilies, like one would have been among sisters, Will had no trouble guessing she would have been an excellent teacher.

"I fetched the kit," Will said. "Come here for a second."

Hannibal turned around but stepped back, toward the lake.

"Come take a dip with me," he demanded with a polite smile. "The weather is begging us."

"That's not really what I have in mind right now. Can you come here, please?"

The left side of Hannibal's face was still covered in blood. The sun was drying it and turning it into black crusts.

"Why would I indulge you when you are not indulging me, Will?"

"Cause I asked first?"

"Inconsequential. My proposition is more entertaining for both of us."

Hannibal turned around and began to undo his black, funeral jacket, neatly folding it before putting it down on the wooden pontoon beginning just in front of him.

"Hannibal..." Will sighed.

"Once you will have cared for the cut on my forehead, I won't be able to go underwater without ruining your work. I tend to live the moment at its fullest before it is taken away from me and nothing is left for me to do but dwell on what could have been."

"Is it a damn metaphor for grief?"

Hannibal, as he was unbuttoning his shirt, turned to Will and carefully whispered a secret yet crucial truth of the universe.

"Everything is a damn metaphor for grief, Will."

He smiled with connivance, pleased to share that little insight with his husband, and then he straightened up, taking his shirt off and revealing the Verger crest on his back.

Will sighed again, passing a hand on his face. What was he meant to do exactly? Apart from going Hannibal's way.

With a mixture of annoyance and resignation, Will dropped the kit and began to undress. He hated to admit it but going for a swim actually sounded like a nice idea.

Hannibal, who had meticulously piled his clothes with a care that didn't go well with impromptu bathing, was already down to his underwear and he dipped in the lake with a perfect jump, his hands parting the water so that his body would barely make a splash. Entering the lake like he entered everything, unprompted yet still somehow polite.

He quickly emerged again, taking a long breath.

"So? How is it?"

"Rejuvenating," he replied.

Will dropped his clothing in a shapeless heap, next to Hannibal's precise pile, and, leaving the fabrics of grief behind, he jumped as well.

The water was much colder than he had expected it, chasing in a second the sticky, unpleasant warmth that had lingered on his skin. The water was cloudy, and it was hard to see anything, but it felt fresh and clean compared to the sweat. He stayed a few seconds under water, cooling himself down, and observing a couple of fish urgently swimming away from him and disappearing behind a blue reflection. Before he could begin to struggle for air, he swam up and his head pierced the surface.

"Your judgement?" Hannibal enquired once Will had breathed.

"Rejuvenating, I wouldn't know. Definitely refreshing."

Hannibal's head disappeared under the water again and when it reappeared, ten seconds later, most of the blood was gone from his face. He then closed his eyes and laid back, letting the water carry him.

For a moment, Will watched him float on the surface, the sun hitting on the water to make it shine and glitter like a bed of liquid gold.

It could have been a nice summer indeed. A long time ago, it must have been.

"Will?" Hannibal quietly called.

"Yes?"

"How was it? Your father's funeral."

Will moved his hand underwater, and caressed the surface from underneath, watching the ripples born from the points of contact spreading around and, weakened and slowed,

reaching Hannibal's resting body without bothering it.

"There weren't a lot of people either. A bit more than for your aunt, but not by far. Coworkers mostly. A few old drinking buddies from a time before me. A handful, all in all."

None Will had truly known.

"The ceremony was very modest. He wouldn't have liked all the theatrics. Plus, with so few of us, it would have looked stupid. There were few words. None of the guys were good with them. That was why they were friends with my dad. So, we didn't say much. There was the cremation. They gave me the ashes in a plastic bag they kept in a cardboard box. The guys bought me a drink. The next day I took the boat, sailed to the horizon, and dropped the ashes there. He has a commemorative plate in Louisiana, but if I wanna visit him, I'll most likely take the boat."

"You come from a world that doesn't speak, Will."

Hannibal opened his eyes and looked at Will, the water caressing his cheek. On his jaw, just above the surface, opposed to his wound, a bruise was growing where Popil's fist had connected with the face.

"How did that damage you?" He continued. "Or strengthened you."

Will leaned back as well, balancing himself with his arm, trying how the water would carry his weight, and support or fail him.

"I don't know, Doctor Lecter. You tell me. You were my therapist, weren't you?"

"Therapists ask questions, Will. They don't dictate answers. If I was interested in the reverse, I would have become a priest."

"Why didn't you?"

"A heterodox therapist is an avant-gardist. A heterodox priest is a heretic."

Will chuckled at that simple truth.

"And you are nothing if not heterodox."

"Wouldn't you say?"

There was no arguing there.

"I'd say it made me more receptive to silence," Will said to answer the original question. "Probably more sensitive. Not sure if it's a damage or a strength."

"It can be both."

For a moment, the two men remained there, floating on the surface, carried by the troubled waters. The time was slow above them, as lazy as them. The sweet smell of the many flowers and fruit trees was embalming the air and the blue of the sky, mirroring the blue of the lake, was making it hard to tell the up apart from the down.

Will was slowly sensing his mind quietening and reaching a nearly sleepy state when Hannibal asked again, in a whisper just above the song of the birds and the insects.

"Did you hope that your mother would come to the funeral?"

The water was cold enough to send shivers up Will's spine.

"I knew she wouldn't."

"Knowing and hoping are two different things."

"I don't know what I was hoping for. I don't think there was much going on in my mind at that time."

"And what about now? Still hoping or thinking of a possible last meeting? Before it is too late."

A last meeting Hannibal hadn't had. And a meeting Will didn't want.

"I think I really don't care," he said truthfully.

"That's good."

Will looked at Hannibal who smiled at him. They grabbed each other's hand and pulled themselves up, until they were facing each other, the water reaching their shoulders.

"The thing with being an orphan is that everyone expects you to miss something," Hannibal stated. "But, once again, you and I are alike. There is nothing missing. No lacking in the construction."

Hannibal's hands found Will's back underneath the water and caressed their way down the spine.

"Look at us," he murmured in Will's ear. "Motherless boys the both of us. Turned more-than-human men. We have transcended our odds and conditions. We have birthed ourselves, Will. How glorious of us."

Will felt the hands adoringly flatter his flank, and the outside of his thigh, as he was clinging at Hannibal's shoulders to keep them both afloat.

He could feel the warmth of Hannibal's chest against his, and the soft caress of a breath on his lips.

Hannibal was right. Here, now, they weren't coming from anyone but themselves. Made complete by the other, there was no place left vacant in their life. The two of them were enough of a world. And enough of a family.

Hannibal was Will's origin, much more than anyone or anything else.

"Beautiful," Hannibal said about Will's face before kissing it.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters left to conclude that little, aimless story. It will all be out before the end of next week.

I hope you're having a nice week! ;)

Dame d'Onze Heures

Chapter Notes

Salut les gens !

Chapter 7. It was my favorite to write, so I hope you'll enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 7

Dame d'Onze Heures

The sun had dropped behind the horizon and the nocturnal birds had replaced the diurnal ones. The sky, just as cloudless as it had been during the day, was letting the moon shine brightly and its silvery glow was illuminating the night. The windows, left open, were letting the perfumed wind in, and its soft breath was cooling the sheets and the skins.

Will had just woken up, not even a minute ago, from blurry bits of already forgotten dreams. The morning to come was still far away, but their awkward evening was fading already. After their swim, Hannibal had let him take care of his cut and Will had carefully cleaned and closed it. Chiyoh had left food on the countertop in the kitchen, Hannibal had cooked it, and they had all eaten in their own corner of the house: Chiyoh in the dining room, Popil in one of the studies and Will and Hannibal outside, on the stone rim of one of the fountains.

It had been a quiet evening where not much had been said. The whole day had felt unfinished when they had gone to bed and though Will had been able to get a couple of hours of sleep thanks to the dip in the water, he now was wide awake on the bed, his mind unwilling to rest.

He turned on his side to watch Hannibal who was quietly sleeping next to him. Even without any other source of light than the moon, Will was able to see his work. The five thin wound closure strips were still keeping the cut tightly close and though the edges had swollen a bit, it still looked clean and healthy. The bruises however had taken an even darker hue and

looked fully black in the night. It had reached the corner of Hannibal's mouth and looked nearly as bad as the one Will had left on Popil's cheek.

Nearly, Will thought with joy.

He leaned forward and laid a light, gentle kiss on top of the bruise. Hannibal didn't react but when Will sat up, he reached forward in his sleep and pressed his face against Will's deserted pillow. Will pushed back the blanket and got out of the bed. He knew he wouldn't fall asleep like that. He needed to walk a bit and get his mind to calm down. He wasn't even thinking of something specific. His brain was simply happy being uselessly busy, with half thoughts and partial ponderings. He needed a break from sleep, for now.

Passing by the cupboard, Will grabbed a pair of shorts that he quickly put on. They hadn't packed for more than three to four days but they had known about the weather beforehand and, apart from the funeral suits, all of Will's clothes were light.

By the entrance of the room, he picked up his shoes and, after having quietly closed the door behind him, he sat down on the first step of the stairs to put them on and tie them. Once he was done and ready, he walked down the tower.

He decided he would first go to the kitchen. Have a glass of water. Grab a cold beer, if he was lucky. Hannibal didn't like the taste of cheap alcohol on Will's lips, but he would have to deal with it because nothing sounded more heavenly than this perspective, right in that instant.

In the darkness, his steps sometimes lightened up by a welcomed window and a ray of moonlight, Will made his way through the castle, and down the stairs. On the first floor, he turned right and went to the kitchen he had already spotted earlier today.

When he stepped into the room, through the already open door, he instantly noticed that the air was colder here. Hazard of the exposure or result of the cold room next to it, Will didn't know but it was much more pleasant to stand here than in the hallway. However, he wasn't alone to have discovered that haven of freshness.

Popil was standing in the frame of the open backdoor, a cigarette in his mouth, its tip glowing red in the night. A volute of smoke was rising from it, shimmering under the moonlight. He seemed to be so lost in his thought he was even forgetting to smoke, letting the cigarette slowly die at the corner of his lips rather than breathing in its tobacco. Not wanting to startle the man, Will made sure to make some noise as he was walking in.

Popil heard it and looked over his shoulder.

"Hard time finding sleep, uh?" he asked when he recognized Will.

"Something like that."

Will walked to the fridge and opened it. To his surprise and joy, he found three packs of beers on the lowest shelf, the can being covered with condensation was foretelling a cold liquid.

"Perfect."

"Hmm?"

Will detached one of the cans from its pack and showed it to Popil.

"Oh, yes, I bought them yesterday," he explained. "Didn't know what everyone's emotional state would be, so I was generous with the quantity. Though, I don't think your friend likes them very much."

"My husband."

Popil vaguely gestured an apology.

"You want one?" Will offered.

"I wouldn't say no."

Will grabbed another can and walked to the backdoor. He leaned against the wall and handed the second can to the old man. They popped them open and brought them to their lips. The drink was cheap, bitter, and freezing, and it was everything Will needed. He let it sit on his tongue for a second before swallowing it down.

Just like Hannibal's, Popil's bruise was black under the silver light of the moon, and it was now covering his whole cheek. A physical similarity between two men related by a lot, if not by blood.

"I didn't really plan on apologizing," Will informed, before gesturing toward his own face to give more context to his sentence.

"I didn't tab on it anyway," Popil said with a shrug. "That's what happens when you punch someone with a spouse nearby."

"Yet you still did it."

"Well... I wanted him to shut up."

That was a fair desire. And a widely shared one. This guy would go along great with Jack, Will thought.

Popil, apparently remembering he had a cigarette in his mouth, took a long breath, filling his lungs with smoke before breathing it out. The smell of the tobacco was not enough to overcome the one of the flowers, and the cold air of the night took them both away anyway.

"Too hot to sleep?" Will asked, taking another sip of his drink before pressing the cool can against his cheek.

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

"You know..."

Popil shrugged again and took the cigarette between his index and his middle finger.

"The love of my life's dead."

He smiled. The kind of smile that could only be crafted on faces that had never figured out how to cry.

"Not the best week I've ever lived, all things considered."

Used to Hannibal's detached and nuanced grief, Will could easily forget that most human beings were devastated by death and loss. Popil didn't look devastated, but Will didn't think the old man was the kind to wear his emotions on his face.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Will said automatically.

He felt like he had kept saying these empty words ever since the news had been broken. But what else was he supposed to say?

"Thank you, son."

A bird, flying high in the sky, passed under the moon, projecting a quick shadow over Will and Popil.

"You've talked to Chiyoh?" the former Inspector asked.

"Yeah. Just after the funeral. Once we were back here. Briefly."

"How much does she hate me?"

"She is angry."

Popil rubbed his forehead, suddenly looking every bit as old as he was.

"I have never been able to do anything good with that boy," he whispered to himself.

"Well... beating him up between two doors of a police station mustn't have helped."

Popil straightened up, bringing his cigarette back to his lips.

"He told you about that?"

"He did."

"Yeah, not my proudest moment. Though I can't find it in me to regret much."

He exhaled the smoke once again and when he resumed, his voice was slightly lower, rubbing against a burnt throat.

"I remember the first time I met him," he retold. "A lad. No taller than that."

With his hand, he showed a heigh barely reaching above his hips.

"You would have never believed he was thirteen. I even thought his age was wrong. That can be the case with rushed international adoption. Very short, and frail. With a soft voice. Rarely saying anything. Just looking at you and waiting for I don't know what."

Popil's expression was strange. As if he didn't know how those memories were making him feel.

"And there was the other guy. Thrice my weight. Taller than me. At least he was while he still had his head on his shoulders."

Once again that empty smile that was there as a placeholder for an expression Popil's face couldn't manage.

"That little boy killed him. In cold blood. With a damn sword. Opened the belly and cut the head off. Plain and simple. Then he sat down between the body and the head. And played a few songs on his luth. He drew the study of a spider that was on the flower next to him. And when he got bored, he put the head in his school backpack and got home on his bicycle."

That sounded very much like Hannibal indeed.

"I know him," Will said. "I know how he is."

"I can't tell if I knew him, but I sure guessed him. Before anyone else. I was the first one who said that there was something terribly wrong with that kid. But no one could see it. He was just that poor boy, ward of the local celebrity. Twice orphan now. It was as if no one else could see the terrible intelligence in his eyes."

"Seeing it didn't bring you much good."

"No. And I jumped through hoops to ignore it. It wasn't like I was not sad for the boy. Sure, he had it hard. And I thought... if someone like Sheba could love him so dearly, then surely there was a reason. The boy had all the circumstances on his side. The man he killed was wicked. Properly hated by everyone. He had a hand in Robertus Lecter's death. Hannibal made it very easy for everyone to not want to get to the truth. And I let it go as well."

"For him? Or for Lady Murasaki?"

"For everyone, really."

The cigarette, left uncared for for far too long, wasn't glowing anymore, and when Popil breathed in, no smoke entered his lungs. He took a lighter from his pocket and gave some enthusiasm back to the cigarette.

"We didn't hate each other," Popil felt the need to say, "not at first. I think we nearly hit it off. I know, hard to picture, yet that's the honest truth. He was smart, he was actually able to make me laugh, and I could see he was an interesting boy. He won't tell you that now, but I know he enjoyed our first meeting tremendously. He didn't act with me the way he acted with the other policemen. He seemed more... present when it was me."

"Someone has really messed up, then. Cause there isn't much left of that today."

"Once the investigation was closed and I began to talk to Sheba, that's when things got real sore, real quick. He used to respect me, and it was all lost in a week."

"His uncle had just died."

"Yes. I was aware. I really didn't blame him for any of it. Sheba was angrier at him than I was. But I thought that he would grow out of it. Worst case scenario, we have a bad relationship 'til the day I die."

"Turned out there was a worse case than this one."

"I knew there was something wrong. I just didn't know that it was already too late."

The cigarette was nearly all burnt off, and Popil was now enjoying the last few puffs.

"You know what happened to him, don't you?" he asked. "In Lithuania."

"I won't say a word on it."

"You don't need to. I already know."

That took Will by surprise, and he looked up from his can to detail the old man.

"How do you know?"

"He told me."

Now, that seemed very unlikely.

"Why would he do that?"

"Because Sheba asked him. He was very obedient, when it was from her. At least until a certain age. It's always like that."

"Why would she ask that of him? She knew he hated you, didn't she?"

"It wasn't about love, or family. It was about trying to save Hannibal. I promised her I would investigate Mischa Lecter's death. She thought that, if I could catch the killers and bring them to justice quickly enough, Hannibal wouldn't have the opportunity to kill them. Turned out he was much quicker than his aunt and I thought. And I could tell he was enjoying it. The murders… They weren't angry. They were enthusiastic. His aunt was covering for him, and lying for him, all in the hope of giving him a future and a happy life, and he was there, mutilating bodies for the sake of it, playing with the police. He says he loved her, but he never cared for her. Or for all she sacrificed for him. That's when I stopped having any respect for him. That's when it became reciprocal."

Having accepted that there was nothing left to smoke, Popil put out the cigarette by smashing its barely glowing end against the stone of the wall. A trail of ash was left behind. The next rain would take care of it.

Will thought of metaphors and grief.

"Ultimately, he killed much more than six people, and there was nothing anyone could have done to change anything about him. Though Sheba never stopped wondering. And I never stopped resenting that boy because of that. She got herself sick over it. That's what killed her in the end."

Popil leaned against the doorframe and looked at Will, a slight frown on his face.

"I'm curious," he said. "What do you see in him?"

Gosh, that was a hard question. The kind Will had never asked himself, afraid that he was that he may find the answer.

"It's... heavily linked to circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"How we met. How we got to know each other. Our history. At some point, he just knew me too much for us not to be intimate."

"You started as friends?"

"I started as a patient. He was my therapist. Sort of."

For some reason, that piece of knowledge made Popil chuckle.

"He really has a thing for weird relationships."

"What do you mean?"

"No offense, son. But isn't it a basic rule that doctors shouldn't marry patients?"

"No, I got that part. What do you mean he 'has a thing' for them. What other 'weird relationship' are you talking about?"

Popil didn't answer, his mouth resolutely closed.

"What is it?" Will asked again.

"Forget it, son," Popil answered, checking his pocket for another cigarette. "It's just words. They don't mean anything."

Now, Will knew for certain it was important.

"I'm interested in the nothing they mean," he insisted. "What weird relationships?"

"Nothing. I'm just guessing he must have had his load of strange interactions."

It was an obvious lie. But what was truly interesting was why Popil was feeling the need to avoid answering. So far, he hadn't seemed to mind much sharing away what he knew of Hannibal's childhood. Why draw the line here? Why that sudden desire to protect Hannibal's privacy?

Unless... it wasn't Hannibal's. Unless there was something else that would be incriminated by whatever 'weird relationship' Popil had thought of.

And Will pieced it together on his own. Fairly easily. Something Hannibal had said in the family vault.

"It's him," he stated, finally, *finally* making sense of something major. "When he said that you both know who Lady Murasaki's true love is. I thought he meant his uncle. But he meant himself."

Popil didn't comment. He couldn't. He had punched Hannibal in the face to prevent him from voicing that truth, he wouldn't give it away.

"They loved each other," Will said for him. "Not as aunt and nephew. Not as mother and son. They were in love with each other."

"Hannibal was in love," Popil corrected right away, not standing Will's words. "He was a teenager and a creep, and he was yearning for her."

"That's what she told you?"

"Told me? She wouldn't speak his name! That's how much she hated him in the end. No, that's not what she told me. That's what I know. That's how it was. He can keep lying to himself if he wants to but that won't change the truth."

"What's the truth?"

"That he fucking ruined this family. That he brought misery and pain upon Sheba. Upon Chiyoh and Robertus Lecter. That he destroyed everyone and continued on his merry way. The truth is that Hannibal Lecter is not a God. Not a fallen angel. He is a parasite. And Sheba lived her whole life with gaping, bleeding wounds because of him."

That was what Hannibal left in his trail. God had done the same with His son, and that didn't prevent anyone from worshipping Him.

Will didn't know exactly what the truth was. And with Lady Murasaki gone, he didn't think it could ever be unraveled. They had sealed it away in the family vault.

But Will knew one thing. The respect Hannibal had for consent in romanticism was equal to the one he didn't have when it came to murder. If there had truly been any kind of improper relationship between him and Lady Murasaki, then the truth was much more complex than Popil wished to believe.

Will's beer was empty, and a feeling of exhaustion was slowly but surely washing over him. His stroll had served its aim even if through unexpected means.

He walked to the trashcan near the countertop and dropped his finished drink there.

There was a good chance he had just been to the funeral of Hannibal's ex, he was thinking, as he was observing the can at the bottom of the trash bag.

That would only be the second time, now.

"I'm gonna head back to bed."

"I guess, I should do the same," Popil said, though it was apparent that he was still agitated after the conversation they just had. "Gonna smoke one last one before, though. Shit, thirty years without a single cigarette. Gotta catch up."

Will nodded. It would be cruel to add yet another ordeal on the old man's shoulders. Healthiness could wait. Instead, without another word, Will shoved his hands in his pocket

and walked out. He stopped on the threshold, however. One last thought from him, if Popil was granted one last cigarette.

"Was it really worth it?" he asked.

"What's worth it?"

"The vault. Sealing the grave. Was it really worth it to do that? What were you hoping for?"

"I was not hoping for anything. I'm not the one who made that call."

"Who did, then?"

"Chiyoh."

Will remained without reaction for a few seconds, having not seen that one coming.

"Why?"

"Because she doesn't want weirdos to come worship the worst of her cousin where the couple who took her in and cared for her is resting. She wants one last thing to remain untouched. And she knows full well the only way to do that is to keep Hannibal away. She saw firsthand what it does to welcome him anywhere."

"Then... Why did you say it was you?"

Popil shrugged, taking a new cigarette from the pack in his pocket and lightening it up.

"If Hannibal has to be angry at someone, I'd rather have it be me than her. I know what happens to those who anger Hannibal. I investigated it."

Not a lot survived. But Popil didn't seem worried.

"Chiyoh went through enough. And I lived a long life. With Sheba gone… I just don't care anymore. Better me than her."

Will didn't know yet if he would tell Hannibal about that. He had to think about it. At least, he would sleep on it.

With those last words, he exited the kitchen.

He was on the verge of climbing up the stairs when a sudden thought hit him. He hesitated, his foot on the first step.

It was nothing. A vague instinct. One he could barely explain.

But it was tenacious. And Will knew he wouldn't sleep if he didn't check it.

He turned back and crossed one of the perpendicular corridors, leading away from the main hall. He miraculously found his way back to the art room that Hannibal had shown him in the morning. He didn't dare to turn on the lights, but it wasn't necessary. The moonlight, pouring into the room from the many windows, was more than enough.

He walked to the pile of canvas and found back the one that had attracted his gaze earlier today.

Lady Murasaki, striking image of beauty and erotism, giving herself to the water of the lake. Where Hannibal had been taught to swim and to dive.

Will took the painting out of the pile and looked at it under the window. The breasts sticking out of the water, echoes to the water lilies. Her throat offered to the sun. Her head back, with an expression of peace and quiet bliss on her face.

Will turned the painting around. There, on the other side of the plain-woven fabric, the name of the artist.

Lecter indeed.

Preceded by the letter 'H'.

Will wasn't even surprised.

Chapter End Notes

In a few days, I'll post the last chapter. Soft conclusion to this story that is already reaching its end.
In the meantime, take good care and have a nice day/night/whatever!

Achillée Millefeuille

Chapter Notes

Salut les gens !

Last chapter of that lil' story. I'm so happy to have reached the end of it. I'll talk a bit more in the end note but for now I'm leaving you to the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER 8

Achillée Millefeuille

The next morning, on the day of their departure, it was the sound of lighting that woke Will up. The first thing he understood was that he was a bit cold, which he thought was a good feeling after the days he had had, but then another low growl broke the silence and the whole ground trembled under the foundations of the tower. The sound of rain hitting the windows was filling the room and producing that uncertain feeling of security that one could have when staying inside while a storm was raging outside.

Lazily, Will stretched his arms, waking up the numb muscles of his shoulders, and then he brought the blanket higher on his chest to keep himself warm. When he opened his eyes, he noticed that the room was significantly darker, the sun hidden above thick gloomy clouds. The wind and the water were thrown so violently against the windows that it was hard to see through them at all.

Hannibal was sitting by the sill of one of them. His sketchbook was on his knees, and he was drawing something with a pencil, his eyes occasionally darting on Will to check a detail or correct a shadow. It wasn't an unusual sight for Will to find in the morning. The first few times it had happened, back during their first month together, he had found it awkward, and it had made him far too self-conscious about his face and body. But years into domestic life had taught him that there was nothing that would successfully prevent Hannibal from admiring and recreating.

What was still surprising was just how many mornings Hannibal would do that. Will wasn't sure if he was working on the masterpiece of a lifetime or if his sketchbooks were covered with hundreds of versions of the exact same subject. More likely the latter, Will was forced to admit. Unsettling indeed, but it was hardly the most unsettling thing about his husband.

"Hi," he said, his voice made hoarse by the deep sleep he had just crawled out of.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal greeted him.

A last detail of the drawing was corrected, and the sketchbook was put down, Hannibal being aware that Will was not exactly fond of being a model, even though he could be reasonably indulgent.

"The weather's gonna be like that for the whole day?" Will asked, stretching again, this time bringing his arms up to elongate his spine and get the muscles of his back moving.

"That is what is announced."

"Does that postpone our plans?"

"If the roads are still clear by the end of the afternoon, I think we can try our luck."

Hannibal put the pencil down on top of the sketchbook, perfectly aligning it with the spine.

"I noticed you brought someone into our bedroom, last night."

Will frowned, his memories of the past hours a bit blurry, but Hannibal elaborated without a word. He grabbed something that Will couldn't see, hidden that it was by the corner of the bed, and he pulled it off the ground. A small painting of a woman lying in water.

Ah yes, Will remembered. He had brought it back with him the night before. With a yawn, he sat up and rested his back against the headboard, the blanket falling around his hips.

"I thought it could make for a nice conversation starter," he explained.

Hannibal turned the painting toward him and admired it for a moment.

"Not my finest work but, considering the young age of the artist, commanding some respect I would say."

"Why didn't you tell me it was yours?"

"Because you didn't ask."

Will chuckled, between amusement and frustration. Leaning more towards frustration than amusement, actually.

"Your lies are a one-trick pony, Hannibal. Always the same modus operandi."

"I told you he taught me to paint. There is only one art room. Of course, some of the paintings are mine, Will."

"That's not just any painting, now, is it?"

Hannibal put it down against the wall.

"I talked to Popil," Will told him.

"I knew I could smell down-market."

"That's the beer."

"At least he is not mixing patterns."

"He told me about Lady Murasaki. About you and her."

The laughter that left Hannibal's mouth could be described as nothing other than disdainful.

"He told you about that? I am very curious to learn what he believes he knows."

"You don't think he knows anything?"

"I think if Pascal was able to understand anything about Lady Murasaki, he wouldn't be half as pitiful a man."

"But you understood her. Lady Murasaki."

"I did. Don't compare me to him, Will. You know better."

"There's ground for comparison. You were both in love with her."

Hannibal was not pleased by that sentence, but he also was too wise to retaliate. Will was not Popil. Hannibal knew aggravating him was a dangerous idea.

"Why?" Will asked.

"Why does one feel love? Or connect? She was of a striking beauty. Noticed it the first time I laid eyes on her. She had a subtle, clever mind and never needed words to speak and sing. She was a haven of peace and art, after years of base violence, diseased filth and crass bestiality. She washed my body and educated my mind."

"She did what a mother would do, Hannibal."

"I already have a mother. Everyone is so eager to forget about it, but I don't."

"A mother you never mention. You never think about. A mother whose only role in your life has been to die. You are born from that womb, both physically and spiritually. But Lady Murasaki is the mother who raised you, Hannibal. And you not admitting it is unworthy of you."

"I am not denying what she did for me."

"No, but you are diminishing the maternal aspect of it, because it makes it easier for you to claim that your adoration for her was pure and not the result of an obsessive attachment and a perverted affection for your own kin."

"There was nothing perverted."

"Of course, there was. What I don't get is why it matters to you. Your whole existence is defined by its unnatural twists. Why is this one the one you won't accept?"

"Because there is nothing to accept, Will."

"Nothing to accept? I'm not talking of lectures, Hannibal, but for God's sake, surely you can see it. Why are you so pigheaded? Why is it the one thing where you just won't admit it?"

"Because she is dead!"

His voice, though low and cold, had whipped through the air, slashing across Will's words. A second later, a lightning flash cut the sky in half and thunder invaded the silence.

"What would be the point?" Hannibal continued, calmly but still as coldly. "It is too late for admission. She is dead and she hated me."

Will sighed, not having much to say. He didn't regret bringing up the topic and roughly forcing some words out of his husband; he knew it needed to be addressed and that Hannibal didn't react to empathetic approaches. But that didn't make it any easier.

"She was not my mother, Will," Hannibal repeated, his eyes on the painting at his feet. "I had a mother. One who loved me. One who died to protect me. One who told me every day and every night how much my existence was a blessing, how brighter her world was with me in it. The woman who birthed me loved me, Will. And yes, her life was short. Yes, she never got to see me grow and never learned what I was. But it still matters. It still counts for something. It has to."

Will slowly nodded, his head down. It was all too late to come clean of anything. And if it mattered to Hannibal that his physical body was coming from a belly that had cherished him, then Will wouldn't argue against it.

Instead, he got out of bed and, still in his underwear, he crossed the room to sit by the windowsill as well. Hannibal didn't look at him, his eyes going from the painting to the droplets of rain running down the glass.

"You're right," Will said. "You've been adored, and nothing can change that."

Hannibal didn't reply, but Will didn't expect him to. He simply took him in his arms, bringing his lover against his chest. He passed a hand behind Hannibal's head and pressed it against his shoulder.

Hannibal didn't protest and, after a couple of seconds, his arms found Will's waist and he tightened their embrace.

For a moment, they did nothing else but exist in each other's arms. The lightning and rain kept at bay but the walls and windows.

Everything is a damn metaphor, Will thought, as he was imperceptibly rocking back and forth.

After a while, Hannibal slowly backed away from the hug. Will let him go and softly kissed his cheek then the corner of his mouth.

"You are aware that I don't truly need cheering ups, aren't you?" Hannibal checked, just to be sure.

"I am. Fully. I just do what I feel like doing."

He kissed Hannibal's lower lip and nibbled on it before apologizing with a caress of his thumb.

"Isn't that what you've always wanted for me, Hannibal?"

"It is."

Hannibal pressed his lips against Will's forehead before leaning back against the frame of the bay window.

"I'm gonna go check if there's anything in the kitchen," Will said. "I don't think that anyone went out to buy stuff in that weather, but who knows."

"There are still a few apples if you are hungry. And a plate worth of leftovers from yesterday evening."

"I'm gonna have a look."

Will stood up and dressed up with one of his last sets of clean clothes. He walked to the door but, on the threshold, he hesitated. He didn't know if it was truly the right time to mention it. But keeping it to himself felt too much like Hannibal's specific brand of lying.

"Hannibal?"

"Yes."

"About the family vault..."

He turned around to face Hannibal though his hand was still on the knob of the door.

"It's Chiyoh who made the decision. Not Popil."

"I know."

That… was unexpected.

"You know?"

"I know Inspector Popil wouldn't bother to do that. And I know Chiyoh would. It looked like her deed."

"When did you understand?"

"The second I noticed it was sealed."

"Then... Why go after Popil?"

Hannibal detailed the patterns that the rain was drawing on the window. Apparently, the topic being discussed was doing very little to interest him.

"If he was willing to take the fall, he may as well be the one biting the dust."

It wasn't possible to tell if Hannibal was truly looking at the rain, or at his own reflection on the window.

"I truly don't care about the family vault, Will. I want my body to rot on top of yours."

"Very likely that you will be granted that."

With that conclusion, Will closed the door, leaving Hannibal alone with his thoughts. In the entrance hall, Will stumbled across a very wet, very rushed Popil. Coming from outside, he had run up inside and was now trying to wring out his pullover, letting the water drop on the other side of the threshold. There was a portion of roof protecting the front porch, but the wind was strong enough to carry the rain horizontally. Popil's attempt was doomed to failure.

"Something has come up?" Will wondered as he had reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Just trying to prepare the car," Popil said, giving up on trying to dry himself in any way and simply closing the door. "I really plan on leaving before noon."

At the moment he turned away from the entrance, the rain noticeably calmed down, the wind now quieter and the droplets not hitting as violently. It was still very much raining, but the downpour had eased a bit.

"Really?" Popil exclaimed at the address of the door. "Is it some kind of joke?"

"That's always how it goes."

"Someone up there's having a laugh."

Will began to walk to the kitchen and was surprised when Popil followed him.

"I'm taking what's left with me," the old man told him when Will glanced at him with suspicion. "We don't want to leave anything to rot."

"Who's gonna take care of the castle, now?" Will asked, holding the door open for Popil.

"Technically, it's Hannibal's property. But I don't think it would take long for authorities to reclaim it. I'm hoping he will give it to Chiyoh, or everything here will be lost. To Chiyoh or to anyone, of course. Whoever can take care of it. But I feel like Chiyoh deserves a home."

"She does. He may well do that."

"You could have a word with him?"

"If it comes down to it, sure, but I don't think it will be needed. He'll do it on his own."

Popil went to the fridge and began to gather what had been left there to cool. Will, on the other hand, found the fruits on the countertop and took two apples from the bowl. They were big and generous, their skin bright red and their flesh indubitably juicy.

"It's strange," Popil mused, as the light of the fridge was making his face appear whiter, nearly ghostly. "To see someone who is actually able to influence him. Never thought it would happen."

"Hannibal's full of surprises."

"Ever wondered what about you made the cut, when no one else did?"

"I asked him. Once."

"What did he say?"

"He said it's 'cause I'm good-looking."

"Ah."

Popil seemed as puzzled as Will had been the first time he had heard the weirdly superficial answer.

"You think it's the true reason?"

"I think Hannibal's beyond reason."

He picked up a couple of apples, wordlessly stating that it was really all there was to say about the matter of Hannibal's reasons. He was past them. Had been for a long time.

"Do you want something from the fridge, son?" Popil asked, picking up on the cue and therefore moving on with the conversation.

"No, we're good. Thanks."

With his two apples in hand, Will left the kitchen and walked up the stairs. The castle was old and not kindly treated by the storm raging above its roof. The sound of rain and fat

droplets crashing on creaking stone and wood was echoing everywhere, filling up the corridors like endless conversation behind closed doors. The walls and floor were grating, and the wind was able to slither between the windows and their frames and sing away. Yet, it was standing strong, still offering warmth and safety to the souls in its belly.

It wasn't the kind of home Will was familiar with or that he even liked. But he could see how such a place could become dear to someone growing among its oddities. He didn't regret having given in when he and Hannibal had argued about what kind of house they would have in Cuba. For someone who had eaten his roots and then proceeded to forget about them, Hannibal was very attached to the idea of a home. Simply, he had little care for those of the past. Only those of the present mattered to him. And among them, the one he shared with his husband was sitting on top of his affection and receiving his every fond attention. Will, on the other hand, didn't think it changed much for him, if he were to live in a mansion or a shabby boat. The reason why he could find a home underneath any sorts of superficial carpentry was certainly also why he had been able to see the beauty of Hannibal. If he had found a warm childhood in the backseat of a shitty car, he could well find a partner in the depth of the deceitful god.

As he was climbing up the stairs leading to the top of the tower, Will looked at the lake he could sometimes catch a glimpse of. Its surface was troubled by the rain, clouded by ripples and foam. Reflecting the sky, the water had taken a dark, moody, grey hue. Even if the rain was not exactly as bad as it had been ten minutes ago, the land was still soaked with water. Only the flowers and trees seemed to be thriving, greedily drinking that source of life after days of drought.

Just to announce his arrival, Will knocked before opening the door. To no end, however, as the bedroom was empty. He looked around, but there weren't many places where one could be hidden. There was no doubt there, Hannibal wasn't here anymore.

The painting of Lady Murasaki had been left behind, carefully placed on the windowsill. Will and Hannibal's belongings were still there, neatly folded and waiting to be packed. But no Hannibal.

Will, puzzled, was about to walk away when he noticed a piece of paper next to the painting. Putting one of the apples in precarious balance in his other hand, Will grabbed it and read the few words written on it.

Went to pay some respect.

With love,

H.

Will slipped the note in his pocket, safely caught the displaced apple before it could fall down and smash on the wooden floor, and he walked back the way he came. He hadn't noticed that Hannibal had left the castle, but it could have happened while he was away in the kitchen. Or, very likely, Hannibal knew many more ways to navigate the castles than Will even suspected.

In any case, Hannibal was not there, and Will felt uncomfortable at the idea of not being by his side while respects were being paid. In the years they had been married – and the years before that as well – Hannibal had never wanted to be alone. He could of course bear loneliness; he didn't mind it. But he always craved for Will's presence, no matter the circumstances. The joyful gleam in his eyes each time Will was entering the room was unmistakable. Wanting to be alone to grieve would be quite understandable if it was coming from anyone, but, from Hannibal… there was just something that was not sitting well with Will.

And Hannibal was never acting out of character.

Will went back to the entrance, opened the door with his elbow, and was surprised to notice that their car was still there, along with Popil's and Chiyoh's motorcycle. He closed the door again, uncertain of what it meant.

Surely, Hannibal had not gotten to the cemetery by foot. There was no reason to do that.

"The kitchen's clean," he heard a voice say. "I think I'm done."

Popil, a leftover pack of beer under his arm, coming from the corridor next to the stairs, was making his way toward the entrance, with Chiyoh by his side.

"Thank you, Pascal. I will take care of the electricity and the water before leaving."

The two of them reached Will and, as he still had his back against the door, they looked at him with surprise.

"Already leaving?" Popil asked.

"No. I just..."

Will was not sure. The car was there, yet Hannibal wasn't...

"What is it?" Chiyoh questioned, sensing that Will was at a loss.

"Nothing bad. I think. It's just that Hannibal said he was going to the cemetery, but he didn't take the car."

Popil stepped forward to look through the transom windows to make sure his car was still there as well.

"I wouldn't put it past him to walk there in this weather," he shrugged once he was sure his vehicle was still in the driveway. "He is not often bothered by what regular people don't want to interact with."

"He told you why he was going to the cemetery?" Chiyoh interrogated.

"He didn't tell me, but he wrote it. To pay his respects."

"He wrote it?"

Will struggled with the apples for a second and then handed her the note he had shoved in his pocket.

"He is not saying he is going to the cemetery," Chiyoh pointed out, after reading it.

"No, but where else would he be paying respects?"

Chiyoh frowned, apparently able to think of somewhere else where one could pay respects. She handed him the paper back.

"What is it?" Will asked, catching her expression.

"Maybe the car is still here because he is still here as well."

Will let her elaborate on that.

"That's an old thing. I don't know if it still exists. I've never seen it."

"What are you talking about?" Popil questioned.

"There was this place. When we were children. It all started when Hannibal pushed that classmate down the staircase."

Something about Hannibal starting from violence. How typical.

"It was his third and last school. When he got home after having been kicked out, Mr Lecter was not pleased but he tried to understand. Like always. I remember he spent hours in the art room with Hannibal, trying to get to the bottom of it. And it was at a time when Hannibal still didn't speak, so it was no easy task.

"In the end, I don't know if Mr. Lecter misunderstood or if it was truly what had happened, but the conclusion was that the boy had tried to befriend Hannibal when other kids had told him he was adopted. Because the boy had just lost his mother or something of that sort. He thought they could relate. But Hannibal got irritated over the fact that the boy's mother was buried when his wasn't.

"Mr. Lecter thought Hannibal wanted a place to grieve. I think he was just jealous and coveting the aesthetic of a grave. But it doesn't truly matter what the truth was. It became something of a problem because Mr. Lecter couldn't get any kind of funeral structure for his brother and sister-in-law. Hannibal's parents were still not officially dead at that point, just missing, and cemeteries don't welcome the living. So, Mr. Lecter told Hannibal they would make their own ceremony. They spent a whole afternoon looking through the few things Mr. Lecter had left of his brother and his brother's wife. Then they left and went to create their private mausoleum.

"I remember that I kept asking Lady Murasaki if I could visit, but she said it was for Hannibal and Mr. Lecter only."

"Do you know where it was?" Will asked.

"No. I know it was outside. Near the lake, since that was where they were heading. But I never followed them. And I never tried to find it."

"I will," Will said.

"Maybe he wants to be alone," Popil pointed out.

"I'll be the one interpreting Hannibal's silence, thanks."

He walked to the door and opened it once more.

"I am coming with you," Chiyoh said, "I will try to find where this place is. The lake is wide, that will take you hours."

Popil tagged along as well, for reasons he didn't specify, though Will guessed it had to do with the fact that everything felt like a last goodbye. And the funeral of the day before had left everyone with a sour aftertaste of incompletion.

It was not as torrential as it had been when Will had woken up, but the rain was still falling, dumping the clothes and turning the soil into mud. In a few seconds, they were all wet to the bones, and they had to rip their feet out the boggy soil at each step. The water and the wind were warm, however, keeping the chills at bay.

It was with relative confidence that Chiyoh guided them to the lake, past the wooden pontoon and along the shore. If the side of the lake that was next to the castle was clear, the forest around had reclaimed a whole portion of the waterfront, the low branches of the willows falling like cascades above the surface. After less than a minute of walking, they had reached the cover of the foliage and the castle disappeared from their sight. Chiyoh continued to follow the lake however, sometimes climbing over sharp rocks or stepping over arms of water to not stray from the shore.

"I've been told that Hannibal's mother loved nothing more than to paint water," she told them while she was looking around to see where to go next. "I'm sure Mr. Lecter would have wanted somewhere with a view."

"He knew her well?" Popil asked.

"I think he knew her more than Hannibal did."

That was a strange answer to give, Will thought. It was implying that Hannibal didn't know his mother accurately. Or at least not as accurately as his uncle. But Will decided to not top that statement with any question. Firstly, it wasn't what mattered in the moment. And secondly, Will didn't want any information on that topic. It didn't matter who Hannibal's parents had been. Only mattered what he was keeping from them.

It was true for Will's parents as well, he only now realized.

"Careful," Popil warned them, bringing Will out of his thoughts.

"There must be an easier way," Chiyoh acknowledged while keeping a branch away from Will's and Popil's path. "I don't see Mr. Lecter doing that."

"It was a long time ago," Popil reminded her. "Maybe plants have grown, and things have changed."

They continued anyway, stopping from time to time to look around and to try to spot anything.

That was Will who noticed it first. And the fact that his husband was one for bold colors when it came to suits indubitably helped.

On the shore, one of the trees had grown crooked, its massive trunk twisting around itself and continuing parallel to the surface of the water. Its big roots spurting out of the friable soil was creating a natural recess, nearly the size of an adult man. That was in front of that recess, on a root that was hovering above the grey water, that Hannibal was sitting, his back to them. He was just as wet as them, having been under the rain for much longer, but he didn't seem to even notice it. He was simply looking ahead of him.

Will struggled a bit to join him, and when he stepped on the root by his side, Hannibal looked up.

"Hi."

It was hard to tell if he was surprised or not.

"Hi," Will answered, caressing Hannibal's wet hair to push the strands away from his eyes.

He sat down, right next to Hannibal, progressively joined by the two other grievers.

In the natural recess, protected from the rain and the wind – the way the visitors weren't – three items had been mistreated by time and nature but had survived on makeshift altars. A man's shirt, old and formerly white, with moss slowly growing on top of it. A woman's perfume, contained in a finely sculpted bottle of crystal, the faded label now fully unreadable.

And finally, a paintbrush, covered with old, watery stains, its remaining bristles sticking out in all directions.

Three items for three missing parents.

Hannibal tried to hold Will's hand, but he noticed what he was carrying and smiled to himself.

"I was thinking of Koto cords, but this will be a better final piece for that polyptych."

He gently took one of the apples from Will's hands.

"May I?"

"Sure…"

"Thank you, Will."

He put it down, next to the paintbrush. Unlike the other idols, it wouldn't last very long. But it wasn't as if any of the remaining grievers would ever come back anyway. For some it was their first, and for all it was their last glance at an intimate and ephemeral mausoleum, built for the losses of a tearless, cheerful Death hobbyist.

Everyone observed in silence the four gathered items, each to their own thoughts, saying their last goodbyes in the privacy of their own mind. Without a word, Chiyoh took a beer from the pack Popil had carried around under his arm. She passed it around and gave each a can.

Hannibal looked at his, but he wasn't interested enough to be disgusted or vexed. He simply grabbed it in silence.

The rain was falling on the leaves and dropping on their heads, but none felt like standing up and walking away. There was nothing wrong in holding on to the last moment. They would still have the rest of their days to let go.

"If you die before us," Popil said, opening his beer, "will you want us to leave something here. For you."

He didn't ask Chiyoh. The question was for Hannibal alone. After all, this place was all about those who had brought him to the world.

Hannibal took a second to hear the question, and he looked up at the Inspector. Will, who knew every fashion of glance that could be spotted on his husband's face, knew that Hannibal was gauging Popil. Extrapolating on his intentions. But even though he could sometimes willingly indulge in bad faith, Hannibal was never blinded by it. And he knew well that, though Popil didn't like him, he would indeed follow the last wishes of the monstrous boy he had seen grow and who had meant so much to the love of his life.

"There is no need," Hannibal finally said, looking away and letting his finger run along the aluminum circle on top of his own can. "There is already something for me."

"What is it?"

"The silence. Out of the six tokens gathered here, this one is mine."

"Six?" Popil repeated.

"Mischa," Will answered without having to even think about it.

"She is the one who isn't there," Chiyoh softly said, having grown in a house that was missing the central part of its heart.

If Hannibal was silence on the altar of human grieves, it was because, first and foremost, Mischa had been absence.

And out of respect for all those who had lived and died in this house and in others, they all remained still under the calming storm. Drinking the cheap alcohol watered down by the rain.

The bitter taste of it was fully buried under the heavy smell of wet soil.

Everything is a damn metaphor for grief, Will thought.

Chapter End Notes

There it is!
I hope the ending is not too anticlimactic, I wanted to keep it soft and pensieve. It's a piece of contemplation more than it is a one of action and I hope you had a good time with it.

It is not, by far, my longest work but I grew so attached to it and I'm really so fond of that little story. I know that nothing really happens, but I think it's the fic I'm the proudest of, of all the ones I've written so far. I loved writing it, and I loved posting it. I also want to thank those of you who have been so kind and cheerful about it. It means a lot that you were willing to give it a go and follow it! I fully expected to publish this into the void, and I was ready for it, so I cherished every expression of enthusiasm and support!

Anyway, I wish you the best of days and, as always, take really good care of yourself, folks!

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